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# Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth: African American Learners Experiencing Oral History as Real Education.

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**NAVIGATING KNOWING/COMPLICATING TRUTH: AFRICAN AMERICAN  
LEARNERS EXPERIENCING ORAL HISTORY AS REAL EDUCATION**

**A Dissertation**

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**The Department of Curriculum and Instruction**

**by  
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December, 2001**



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## **Dedication**

In the spirit of *Sankofa*, expressed by the *Akan* people of Ghana, West Africa, as past, present, and future is now (Willis, 1998), I dedicate this work . Hence, in recognition of the past, I celebrate the memory of my father, Thomas William Taylor, Jr., who taught me as a child the importance of supporting and promoting the social, political, and economic well-being of my ethnic community. In recognition of the present, I dedicate this dissertation to the students/historians of the 1998-1999 McKinley High School oral history project entitled *Inspiring Real Education with African American Learners: Oral History as Pedagogy*. Without their her/his-stories, this dissertation would not have been possible. Last but not least, projecting toward the future, I devote this dissertation to my daughters, Jamila and Taylor, as well as all young people who carry the significations of young, gifted, and Black.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this time to express my sincere gratitude to those who made this dissertation possible. First, I thank God and the universe for guiding me to my calling as a teacher/activist. Second, I want to express my appreciation to my family and friends, who for five years sacrificed a wife, a mother, a daughter, a niece, and a confidante while never refusing me the spiritual, emotional, and financial support necessary to make my earning this Ph.D a reality. Third, I would like to thank my LSU family--Wendy Kohli, my intellectual mother; Petra Munro, my captain-my captain; Bill Doll, my sagacious guru; Bill Pinar, my angel / my friend; Joyce E. King, my *moderira* (teacher); and Becky Ropers-Huilman, my comrade and peer example. To each of you, I owe my intellectual fervor and my burning passion to w/right the wrongs of historically marginalized learners. Last, but not least, I would like to thank my sistah/friends: Tayari kwa Salaam, Denise Taliaferro, and Nichole Guillory. Because of each of you, I am. Thank you for standing by me through thick and thin as well as always believing in me and my potential, even when I doubted myself. Also, I would like to extend a special thanks to my peer readers: Tayari kwa Salaam, Nichole Guillory, Pam Autrey, Sally Tyler, Hongyu Wang, and Brian Casemore.

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Dominant explanations for why urban African American learners dropout is that these students are "at-risk" ( Levine, 1988; Macchiarola, 1988; Sartain, 1989; Swanson, 1991). Such explanations blame the victim while exonerating the role schooling plays in shaping students' "at-risk" conditions (Gordon, 1993; Freire, 1970/1997; Shujaa, 1995; Tatum, 1997; Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a). This research contests these explanations for why African Americans learners drop out by centering 10 African American students' voices to highlight the role curriculum plays in casting them at-risk. Consequently, this work shifts reproach from individual students' home environments to the larger structural dimensions of curricula (what we know) and instruction (how we know it) which alienate and marginalize African American learners.**

**To accomplish this end, this research uses oral history as a method to document the experiences of African American students during a one year oral history project focusing on the history of African American music in South Baton Rouge, Louisiana and uses Carter G. Woodson's notion of "real education," to reveal how rediscovering the past open windows of educational opportunities for urban African American learners. Additionally, as a teacher/researcher of the course "African American Studies," this research**



**blends my self-ethnography with students'/historians' oral histories to recreate our experience with oral history as real education. The ability to achieve this synthesis as well as to document the findings of this study happened through actual classroom teaching, open-ended interviews, classroom observation field notes, teacher plans, students' assignments, as well as video and audio recordings.**

**Through this research, three findings were discovered. One, traditional curriculum in our current educational settings distorts meaning of self and history and attempts to psychologically "lynch" its pupils. Two, traditional curricula's distortion of self and history leads students to seek multiple claims to truth and resist colonialization. Three, for learning to be meaningful and education to be worthwhile, students must participate in choosing who and what they will study.**

## Chapter 1

### Navigating Knowing /Complicating Truth

*Mother, mother  
There's too many of you crying  
Brother, brother, brother  
There's far too many of you dying  
You know we've got to find a way  
To bring some lovin' here today--Yeah  
Father, father, father we don't need to escalate  
You see, war is not the answer  
For only love can conquer hate  
You know we've got to find a way  
To bring some lovin' here today  
Picket lines and picket signs  
Don't punish me with brutality  
Talk to me, so you can see  
Oh, What's going on  
What's going on  
(Cleveland, J., Gaye, M. and Benson, D., 1971)*

Above are the lyrics of vocal artist Marvin Gaye. For me, Gaye's ballad, entitled "What's Going On," is a historical metaphor compelling me to remember the cognitive dissonance that stimulated this research. As a young urban secondary social studies teacher, often I would find myself trying to figure out what was going on with my urban African American learners. Most of my students seemed dismayed, distraught, and outright angry about learning history. The more bubble gum trade-offs and jeopardy frills I used in attempts to pacify their dispositions and make them want to learn our school district's rigid American studies curriculum, the less they seemed interested in my lessons. Later in my teaching career, I discovered that their resistance was not an isolated incident confined to our lower Ninth Ward classroom located in New Orleans, Louisiana. Rather, their defiance mirrored other urban African American learners across the nation.

In Going to School: The African American Experience, Kofi Lomotey (1990) reported that 50 percent of African American children in urban public schools dropped out. In The Real Ebonic Debate, Perry and Delpit (1998) stated that in California's Oakland Unified School District, 53 percent of its African American population accounted for 80 percent of the school systems' suspensions, that 71 percent of these students were classified as having special needs, and that the district's African American student population's overall grade point average was D+. Richard Fossey (1996), in "School Dropout Rates: Are We Sure They Are Going Down?" observed that, in Louisiana in 1973, 66.5 percent of a cohort of ninth graders graduated in four years while only 46.1 percent graduated in four years, two decades later. Specifically, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Fossey found that the percentage of ninth graders who graduated with their classmates dropped from 66 percent in 1973 to 46 percent in a twenty--year span.

Dominant explanations for high percentages of dropout rates among urban African American students is that these learners' home environments or their lack of study and social skills facilitate students' "at-risk" labeling (Levine, 1988; Macchiarola, 1988; Sartain, 1989; Swanson, 1991). During the 1980s, Harry Sartain, under the direction of the National Education Association, investigated and documented factors which contributed to the making of an "at-risk" student. According to Sartain (1989), educators view "at-risk" learners as "children of school age, who, because of one or more factors in a syndrome of disadvantageous traits, behaviors, and circumstances, are in danger of being unsuccessful in school and/or in danger of becoming enmeshed in

personally debilitating social, emotional, physical, or economic difficulties currently or in the near future" (p. 61). Frank Macchiarola (1988) defines "at-risk" students according to their participation in the educational process. After stating that participation in classroom settings by "at-risk" students is marginal, if not resistant, Macchiarola concludes that these young people grow up to become burdens to society. Additionally, Daniel Levine (1988) describes "at-risk" children as those whose academic achievements are unsatisfactory. Their low academic achievements spiral into a vicious cycle that often leads to their dropping out of school. Both Sartain (1989) and Swanson (1991) conclude that students' home environments are the primary cause for "at-risk" students' educational delinquency. Specifically, Swanson states: "many students come from homes that are lacking in emotional support due to interpersonal conflict or social estrangement. Still more students have experienced a breakdown in family structure and finances due to medical problems, psychological disorders, alcohol or drug dependency, and violence" (p. 4).

Constantly alluding to African American students who are jaded and branding them "at-risk," dominant explanations informed me that since I could not control my students' home environment, then any attempts I made to teach urban African American learners were hopeless. Yet, in spite of these more daunting predications, every now and then I witnessed promise--students who, in spite of their home environment, had questions and wanted to know. However, I must confess that the issues that seemed to concern them most were not topics featured in their American studies textbooks. For them, the

questions that taunted their desire to know were: Why do we have to study American history? Why are there drugs in my community? Why are some people rich and others poor? Because they questioned, I knew there was hope. I believed that if they wanted to know, then they were also willing to learn. My question then became: How and what do I teach? Due to these questions, Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth was conceived.

Posing contradictions to dominant rationale for what frames urban African American learners as dropouts, Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth centers students' voices to highlight mainstream curricula's function in casting them as "at-risk." In so doing, this work shifts reproach from individual students' home environments to the larger structural dimensions of curricula (what we know) and instruction (how we know it) which alienate and marginalize African American learners.

### **"Framing Dropouts"**

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire (1970/1997) holds that schools frame dropouts through banking techniques<sup>1</sup> which squash learners' intellect by providing teaching methods and materials that control and dictate students' knowledge production away from their lived experiences and toward the maintenance of the status quo. Moreover, joining Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Raymond Williams (1976), Beverly Gordon (1993) asserts that banking methods are used to maintain existing social and economic relationships generation after generation. Referring to banking methods

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the phrase "frame dropouts" is taken from Michelle Fine's (1991) work. My use of Freire in critiquing schools as framed dropouts can also be found in the work of Jerome Bruner (1996).

perpetual inimicality as ideological hegemony, Gordon asserts that through ideological hegemony . . .

society reproduces itself partly through the transmission of a system of values, attitudes, beliefs, social practices and norms which function at once to convey and legitimate the ideology and social practices which serve the interests of the dominant class in the established order. ( p. 263)

For Gordon, as well as Henry Giroux (1981) and Michael Apple (1990), these norms and social practices are reproduced through a hidden curriculum. In Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education, Mwalimu Shujaa (1995) terms the hidden curriculum as schooling practices. He holds, like Castenell and Pinar (1993), that through textbooks and lesson plans enabling Euro-cultural transmission to subsequent generations, schooling maintains existing power relations and institutional structures that support these arrangements.

Particularly in the United States, schooling permits a colonialist, White, Anglo Saxon, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Protestant worldview to dominate what is socially valued and to guide patterns of action and learning in public classrooms and society-at-large (Ogbu, 1992; Shujaa, 1995).

Several scholars hold that the consequence of schooling is that, in the process of transmitting traditional ways of knowing to subsequent generations, schooling reconstitutes the ways of knowing and being for those who have been historically marginalized while reinscribing existing social, political, and economic arrangements. Schooling frames what it means to know within a Euro-centric, bourgeois, male perspective (Shujaa, 1995; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

Additionally, they argue that the sponsoring Anglo, middle-class, male culture's way of interpreting the world often contradicts the knowledge of historically colonialized subjects situated in U.S. classrooms. Nonetheless, researchers like Signithia Fordham (1996) and Mwalimu Shujaa (1995) have found that students are forced to learn and to accept their oppressors' knowing as truth in order to pass. This force of will comes with a price. Many African American students become dismayed and repulsed by schooling (Billings, 1994; Hale, 1994; Lomotey, 1990; Shujaa, 1995). Expounding on this posture, John Ogbu (1992) contends that African American children enter United States classrooms with particular beliefs about language, behavior, and customs (Ogbu, 1992). These values often conflict with cultural knowledge gleaned from a colonialist, Anglo-centric, bourgeois, male, perspective (Shujaa, 1994; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Jerome Bruner (1996) asserts in The Culture of Education that:

[A]n 'official' educational enterprise presumably cultivates beliefs, skills, and feelings in order to transmit and explicate its sponsoring culture's ways of interpreting the natural and social world.... In carrying out that function it inevitably courts risk by 'sponsoring,' however implicitly, a certain version of the world. Or it runs the risk of offending some interests by openly examining views that might be taken as like the culture's canonically tabooed ones. (p. 15)

Resisting and refusing to be schooled with dominant "culture's ways of interpreting the natural and social world," many urban African American learners are "framed dropouts" <sup>2</sup> (Fine, 1991; Fordham, 1996). Yet, this framing is not without purpose. I hold that framing dropouts is used to negate

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<sup>2</sup> This term is derived from Fine's (1991) qualitative study entitled Framing Dropouts. Fine's study not only features the educational demise of urban African American learners but the way schools frame urban Latino students as dropouts as well.

universal prosperity<sup>3</sup> and serves the economic backbone of our capitalistic society. Designated “at-risk” or uneducated, as students spiral out of educational environments, they spiral into low-skilled and minimally paid positions necessary for sustaining a capitalistic society (Kozol, 1991; Manning, 1983/2000). Schooling becomes a slippery slope, sliding historically marginalized learners away from the hopes and possibilities of what Denise Taliaferro (1998) terms “education for liberation” and toward economic destitution and poverty.

Infuriated by the “if then”<sup>4</sup> inscribed in the schooling situations of many African American students and other historically marginalized learners, I found myself reflecting on my own schooling experiences. And, I discovered that had I not been willing to succumb to the lessons of my teachers/oppressors then, I too may have been on the slippery slope to economic destitution. I realized, like my students, that I also deplored history.<sup>5</sup>

### **A Defunct Hour of Silence**

I hated history. As a southern, working-middle-class, African American girl, American history class was the defunct hour of silence. Rarely did I hear anything by or about black folks. Often, I would find myself longing for voices

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<sup>3</sup> By universal prosperity, I am alluding to the assumption of the American Dream that in the United States everyone has the opportunity to succeed and be economically prosperous.

<sup>4</sup> If you do not learn what I tell you to learn, then you will be labeled “at-risk” and marked for failure.

<sup>5</sup> Please note that my use of history here does not only apply to the study of past events. Here, I use history as a source of knowledge production used as a generative mechanism to determine schooling experiences in educational discourse.



to enliven America's truth. By the second semester of my eleventh grade year, however, things began to change. Having enrolled in an African American history class,<sup>6</sup> I was introduced to Dr. Carter G. Woodson. My teacher informed me that Dr. Woodson was the "Father of Black history," and the "originator of Black History Month." I guess the terms "father" and "originator" excited me most about Woodson for these were terms I had never heard applied to black folks in American history. Since I had the opportunity to take an African American history class and my peers did not, I felt real smart as I shared these tales with my African American classmates who were not as familiar with Woodson as I.

Years later, as an aspiring activist<sup>7</sup> and attending Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, Woodson, a catalyst once more, influenced my understanding of self and social change. While reading Woodson's (1933/1990/1998a) The Mis-Education of the Negro, I learned that American history, as it had been constructed in my classes, was not only sterile and boring but because of its lessons, I did not know how to be an activist. Modern education had anesthetized my agency to incite social change. Hence, according to Woodson, for me to be a mover and shaker, I needed to be re-educated. That is, I needed "real education" (p. 29). Woodson argued that

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<sup>6</sup> African American history was only offered as an elective for one-half semester.

<sup>7</sup> I refer to myself as an aspiring activist because, at the time, I couldn't identify what was going on with me. I knew that I hated injustice, no matter what the form, and if there was a protest--and yes we had them at Fisk during the late 80s and early 90s--I was there. I had read King's "Letters From a Birmingham Jail" and, as if it was my second nature, found myself quoting his statement, "Injustice anywhere was a threat to justice everywhere." To this very day, these words still kindle my spirit and are my driving force as an educator, a curriculum theorist, a social activist.

real education illuminates African Americans' hidden history to counteract modern education's racist knowing inculcating the thoughts and actions of African American learners. Further, he held that once African American students learned of their fore-parents' accomplishments that these lessons would serve to inform students who they were, what they have done, and what they must do; that is, to be black, to be empowered, and construct knowing in a white supremacist society (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a; 1998b). I began to revere Woodson and found myself wanting to learn more about the history of my people. I wanted real education.

Since real education uses African American history to construct the lessons of African American learners, I began to conceive Woodson's theory as a revolutionary and educative approach with urban African American students. Although his perspective, in my view, essentializes African American experiences,<sup>8</sup> his approach nonetheless seeks to center students' experiences, identities, and subjectivities in their curriculum content. Hence, I came to realize Woodson's notion of real education as an educational philosophy and pedagogical creed that could be created for African American learners by African American learners. Woodson argues that an educational philosophy and pedagogy constructed for African American learners is very important because teachers who are educated through a mis-educative system are indoctrinated with contempt for African American learners. He holds that their mis-education serves to "unconsciously keep the Negro in the ghetto" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a, p.28). I believe that this contempt is

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<sup>8</sup> A discussion of this stance is found in chapter 2 pp.46-50.

neither deliberately conceived nor consciously enacted, but having been constantly informed that African Americans are intellectually inferior and culturally deprived, contempt nonetheless is bred (King, 1991; McCarthy, 1990/1993). With this in mind, the ability for those who have been so educated to create an educational plan on behalf of African American learners and not to African American learners' detriment, in my view, is highly impossible. Educators committed to educating African Americans and other historically marginalized students must first unlearn racist, sexist, and class-biased notions inculcated through schools and permeating society-at-large. Then, and only then, will educators be able to enter into learners' communities and create pedagogies *with* students, not *for* students.

Yet, I must note that as I sit here now, nearly fifteen years later reflecting on my initial introduction to Dr. Woodson, I find myself thinking about his story and the role this played in making Carter G. Woodson a fictional hero. More importantly, I find myself disturbed by how his fiction as "Father of Black History" operates to obscure the "Mothers of Black History"-- women like Nannie Burroughs, Zora Neal Hurston, Mary McCleod Bethune, and Marion Manola Thompson Wright<sup>9</sup>-- and other men and women who either supported Woodson or aided him in historicizing an African American past. Additionally, I find myself bothered by how his fiction as the "originator of Black History Month" placed special attention on his work in black history while blurring his call for economic self-preservation in African American communities

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<sup>9</sup>For a full account of Marion Manola Thompson Wright's contributions to the fields of history, sociology, and African American education, please see Crocco, Munro, and Weiler (1999).

(Woodson in Greene, 1930). Lastly, I am fascinated with how easily Woodson moved me simply because he was an African American who informed me that by omitting my predecessors' experiences from history, schooling had dummed<sup>10</sup> my agency and robbed me of real education.

### **A Critique Unfolds**

Realizing connections between learners' curriculum and the making of "at-risk" learners, in Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth, I highlight dominant explanations used to illuminate "at-risk" students and problematize how such rationales are misconceptions in two respects. First, like Woodson (1933/1990/1998a), Freire (1970/1997), Fordham (1996), and Shujaa (1995), I argue that dominant explanations ignore the role "schooling" (Shujaa, 1995) plays in crafting and maintaining "at-risk" learners. Second, I hold that dominant discourse not only omits the role of schooling practices in framing students dropouts, but dominant discourse also silences students' perspectives when explicating rationales for students' academic failures. Consequently, in Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth, I center urban African American learners' epistemologies by featuring urban African American students' voices to enable teachers, parents, and others concerned about the education of historically marginalized learners, to listen to students so that we can see "what's going on" from students' perspectives. Specifically, in this dissertation, I envision and reconstitute schooling as real education by

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<sup>10</sup> Based on one of Malcolm X's theoretical positions. See chapter 8 p.191, for explanation.

talking with urban African American students who have come to bear the significations of young, gifted, black and "at-risk."

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Early in my graduate school studies, I engaged research on the plight of urban African American learners. Yet, few researchers used African American learners' voices to describe their schooling situations. Michelle Fine (1991) used African American students' voices and their experiences to document the ways in which schools frame them as dropouts. Signithia Fordham (1996), in Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High, likewise used students' voices to uncover modes of students' resistance commonly identified by dominant theories as "at-risk" behavior. Fordham's work illuminates why African American students choose truancy, tardiness, bullying, and/or cheating in response to "schooling." Likewise, the work of Carol Lee (1995), who conducted a study involving 52 urban African American high school students, also centers students' voices. Although other noteworthy researchers like Gloria Ladson Billings (1994), Michelle Foster (1997), and Janice Hale (1994) have been sagacious in identifying "at-risk" schooling conditions, their research most often has centered on teachers' perspectives and their respective pedagogical approaches to reveal malfeasance in schools. Additionally, the theoretical works of Lomotey (1990), Ogbu (1992), and Shujaa (1995), have been brilliant in explicating rationales for understanding the straits of urban African American learners, but few of these writings, in my view, speak with students or are directly rendered from students' perspectives.

The first two years of my academic training in graduate school had mostly disregarded urban African American students' voices. Consequently, more than ever before, I found myself yearning to hear from them. To fill this void, I took an oral history course offered in conjunction with a summer youth oral history project. Housed at McKinley High School, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, this course was particularly fulfilling because it gave me the opportunity to witness students enthusiastically engage schooling by learning her/his-story.

### **Locating Voice**

Paul Thompson (1978/1988), James Hoopes (1979) and other oral historians (see Frish, 1990; Lummis, 1988; Portelli, 1991) maintain that one of the greatest attributes of oral history is that it renders voice to those who have been historically silenced in most documented accounts of history.

Specifically, in Oral History: An Introduction for Students, James Hoopes (1979) maintains that oral history is a way of preserving the stories of historically marginalized subjects that might otherwise be neglected in the retelling of history due to social, economic, and political oppression--for example, the stories of African Americans, who may be non-literate or may have been denied a written history because of political oppression.

Through students' use of oral history as an experientially-based pedagogical approach, learners came to understand history through the her- and his-stories of their local community. Further, they were excited, it seemed, about learning history because their curriculum embraced community studies and consequently, centered their voices and their experiences in their

learning content. They were excited, it seemed, because they were experiencing "real education."

When used as a tool for community studies oral history provides a venue through which urban African American students learn from sagas of their local community. These narratives are often not expressed in textbooks. According to James Hoopes (1979), "[o]ral history refers to the collecting of any individual's spoken memories of his/[her] life, of people he/[she] has known, and events he/[she] has witnessed or participated in" (p. 7). As students document urban African American culture through the voices of urban African Americans, oral history empowers African American learners to w/right<sup>11</sup> into history narratives of their predecessors and the sagas of their communities (MacLeod, 1991). When oral history is used as a pedagogical practice, students start with themselves, their lives and their local community, to historicize local sites of memory. Students gather and organize information that they accumulate from personal interviews and library research. In the process, they analyze and interpret their data and, if they choose, may put forward their "conclusions" in oral histories that are collected and reproduced in a magazine (Wigginton, 1985). One of the critical exercises in oral history is that students/historians cite a trace whose past significance lingers on in the present. I argue that through this cite

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<sup>11</sup> My use of this word w/righting is coined from the expression "write/right" created by Petra Munro (1998). In her article "Engendering Curriculum History" Munro parallels her intentions of writing feminist history with the act of righting the voices of women who have been historically marginalized in dominant historical discourse. Here, and throughout this dissertation, I use w/right or write/right to signify this same parallelism of writing histories while righting the voices of those marginalized in dominant discourses on knowing.

students/historians experience oral history, “spoken memories” (Hoopes, 1979) as “real education.”

According to Paul Thompson (1978/1988), “the social purpose of history demands an understanding of the past which relates directly or indirectly to the present” (p.5). Hence, in the process of historicizing a selected memory, students/ historians under teacher/facilitator guidance document sagas of their local community and are provided with a means to envision how yesterday’s memories bear significance in today’s time. In this light, oral history as real education illuminates a more fluid understanding of history, as past, present, and future as now. Realized this way, oral history as real education, in my view, likens the philosophical expression referred to by the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa as *Sankofa*.

W. Bruce Willis (1998), in The Adinkra Dictionary, holds that Sankofa means “go back to the past in order to build for the future” ( p. 189).

Sankofa<sup>12</sup> is a beautiful bird who is looking behind facing yesterday while dropping an egg in today and walking ahead toward its future. Willis reveals that the “Akan liken this action [of] looking backwards as a symbol of looking to one’s past or with quest for knowledge, returning to the source” (p. 189). For me, the image represents a warning or a beckoning, so to speak, to live in the present mindful of the past and its possible significance in informing one’s present and shaping one’s future. At first glance, one would think that the

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<sup>12</sup> The image of *Sankofa* is represented in many ways. A few years ago while walking through a market in Nashville, TN I happened upon a wood carving of the image of *Sankofa*. The gentleman selling the piece was from Ghana. The *Sankofa* image was of a bird looking backwards while dropping an egg. To this day, the image of this beautiful bird resonates with me and it is this image that I am speaking of when I refer to the term *Sankofa*.



image and the discourse are reactive, predetermined by yesterday, but in actuality they are proactive, for the bird is walking forward heeding the warning of the past and is better informed about its destiny. Hence, for me, Sankofa is a pictorial representation of Malcolm X's (1990) warning that a people who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it. Here, Malcolm argues that a people who do not know the her-and his-stories of their predecessors are doomed to repeat those which are constructed by others<sup>13</sup>. In oral history as real education, students/historians choose who and what they want to study, imagine what evidence is needed, seek out information, capture multiple truths, and publish their findings. Students become constructors of knowledge (Thompson, 1978/1988; Hoopes, 1979). And, a community is given the confidence and license to w/right its own her/his-story (MacLeod, 1991).

After witnessing the enthusiasm of the participants of the 1997 McKinley High School oral history project, I started imagining educational possibilities of oral history as a pedagogical praxis to stimulate real education with urban African American learners. However, having not experienced oral history in an urban high school classroom context, I found myself now wondering: How would oral history incite real education with urban African American learners in a classroom setting? In desperate need of answers and wanting to know "what was going on" from students' perspectives, I decided to implement an oral history project, during an academic year. For nine months,

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<sup>13</sup>For those who may find this difficult to understand, further explanation is forthcoming in chapter 2.

I used oral history as a pedagogical approach to instruct ten urban African Americans learners in a course entitled "African American Studies" at McKinley High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In addition to teaching African American studies oral history style, the purpose of my instruction/ project was to investigate in what ways did oral history inspire real education. Specifically, I was interested in discerning how students could use oral history to navigate knowing and complicate truth. Hence, looking back to yesterday, while standing in the present, and envisioning real education for urban African American learners tomorrow, Navigating Knowing/ Complicating Truth: African American Learners Experiencing Oral History as Real Education is a case study of ten urban African American learners' experiences with oral history as real education.

### **General Overview of the Study**

Using oral history, in a class entitled "African American Studies," I historicize the experiences of ten urban African American learners during the 1998/1999 academic year at McKinley Senior High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to cite in what ways oral history inspires "real education" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1988a, p. 29). Additionally, as a teacher/researcher of this course, I blend my self-ethnography with students'/historians' oral histories to recreate our experience with doing African American studies using oral history as real education. My ability to achieve this synthesis happened through actual classroom teaching as well as documentation of open-ended interviews, classroom observation field notes, teacher plans, students' assignments, and video and audio recordings.

## **Significance of the Study**

There are many teachers and projects across the country who use oral history as a form of experientially-based pedagogy to connect students' lives to an alienated and alienating curriculum ( MacLeod, 1991; Scott's Branch, 1995; Wigginton, 1985). However, none has investigated nor documented the use of oral history as a source of "real education" (Woodson, 1933/1990/ 1998a) with urban African American high school learners. This study seeks to add urban African American learners' perspectives to an existing body of literature focusing on experientially-based pedagogy. Additionally, this study is a significant contribution to current research focusing on curriculum studies, post colonial discourse, urban education, and critical race theory. Moreover, because too often popular assertions seek to blame African American students for a schooling system which oftentimes neglects to educate them, this study seeks to challenge these contentions. By documenting urban African American students actively engaged in oral history as real education, in Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth, I problematize prevailing assumptions of what creates an "at-risk" student and what may be done differently to encourage all students' academic and social success. Though this dissertation focuses on African American learners, I contend that most students in America's schools are faced with "mis-education." By this I mean, curriculum and instruction which silence history, voice, and varied experiences while determining what students should know. Hence, though I forefront African American learners, I w/right this dissertation on behalf of all

historically marginalized learners who are in need of knowing and real education.

### **Dissertation Overview**

Carter G. Woodson's notion of real education is often overlooked in dominant educational discourse. Hence, this dissertation opens with historicizing Dr. Carter G. Woodson. Woodson was chosen to introduce this research because he is, in my view, one of the founding philosophers of emancipatory pedagogy. Specifically, his theory of "real education" (1933/1990/1998a, p. 29) uses yesterday's stories to empower learning today. In so doing, Woodson's notion of real education is a reflection of *Sankofa* and, when used in conjunction with oral history, enables learners to navigate knowing and complicate truth. Therefore, chapter two, entitled "Carter Goodwin Woodson," features Woodson and his theory of real education to explicate its connection to *Sankofa* and oral history in order to re-imagine real education for contemporary urban African American learners. I forefront this historicization of Woodson in my dissertation to situate the theoretical frame of my study.

Chapter three, which is entitled "It's Oral History," is devoted to explaining my use of oral history as methodology. Here, I discuss oral history as pedagogy as well as how I employed oral history as a methodological approach to understand my research question: In what ways does oral history inspire real education with urban African American students in a traditional classroom context? Since a major responsibility for oral historians is naming, defining, and claiming informants as subjects and not as objects, chapter four,

entitled "Naming You, I Claim Myself," follows chapter three and is written to embody students/historians and to inform readers who *they be*.

After discussing the identity of students/historians in chapter four, chapters five, six, and seven follow as an analysis of the data collected for this study. Though students'/historians' oral history topic was the history of African American music in South Baton Rouge, the issue that rose out of the analysis of their data was not their topic but rather student's ability to go back and compare and contrast what they had learned through oral history with what they had and had not learned in their traditional history courses. Through juxtaposing yesterday's history lessons with what they had learned in oral history, students/historians articulated to me how they experienced oral history as real education. Because they relied on their past understandings of history to enable them to better understand their present experience with oral history as real education, their actions, in my view, reflected the philosophical expression of *Sankofa*. Consequently, in chapters five, six, and seven, students/historians voices are illuminated to feature the dynamic and cyclical relationship of past, present, and future as now while explicating for readers how students/historians experienced oral history as real education.

Specifically, in chapter five, entitled: "Slavery This and Slavery That," I highlight how students/historians fetched yesterday's memories today to define oral history as a site of political resistance. Chapter six, entitled "Unveiling the Mystery" is devoted to lessons learned by students/historians today through spoken memories of yesterday. Particularly, highlighting students'/historians' use of self-ethnography, I forefront what they

understood in oral history by featuring various students'/historians' perspectives of their oral history research on African American music in South Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In chapter seven, entitled "Out the Book to Create a Book," I analyze students'/historians' classroom experiences as w/riters of history unveiling truths today to inform lessons of tomorrow. Although the titles of chapters five, six, and seven signify a particular moment in time, within their text, each chapter colludes and collides with rigid expressions of time to practicalize for readers the fluidity of past, present, and future as now.

Chapter eight, entitled "Do You Remember Me," is written as a summary. Though not this dissertation's final thoughts, this chapter notes my research findings to show readers in what ways oral history inspires real education. In brief, the chapter highlights how oral history as real education enabled students to navigate knowing and complicate truth professed in dominant educational discourse. The chapter concludes with contributions of this research to the field of social studies education and with questions in hopes of keeping this conversation regarding "real education" on behalf of historically marginalized learners going.

My final thoughts are expressed as an epilogue. Entitled "W/Righting Oral Histories," here, I frame the ethical dilemmas I faced while engaging this research. Specifically, this concluding part critiques qualitative research and its paradoxical claims of representing voice.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Carter Goodwin Woodson (1875-1950)**

Carter G. Woodson was a scholar and an organic intellectual.<sup>14</sup> He lived during a period described by historian Rayford Logan as the Nadir or the lowest point in African American history (Scally, 1985). Nadir (1865-1965) marks the one hundred year span that followed the emancipation of enslaved African Americans. It commemorates the simultaneous celebration of African Americans' freedom from chattel enslavement and the desecration of their hopes and dreams for full citizenship, economic and social mobility, and educational opportunities (Riggs, 1987). During Nadir, decades of apartheid deliberately subordinated African Americans' rights as United States citizens. Subordination was made possible through Jim Crow laws, grandfather clauses, literacy tests, lynching, and institutionalized segregation (Tindall and Shi, 1984/1996). According to John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss (1994), Nadir was a time period in American history smeared with blatant racial bigotry as well as economic, social, and political disenfranchisement for African American people, due to an abiding belief in Anglo American superiority.

Within Nadir's social context, Carter Goodwin Woodson was a prodigy theorizing black love, self-preservation, and self-determination for African American people. A coal miner, an educator, and the first African American of

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<sup>14</sup>In The American Evasion of Philosophy, Cornel West uses this term to refer to DuBois, whom he calls the Jamesian organic intellectual. An organic intellectual is a grassroots intellectual/pragmatist. I hold that Woodson is also an organic intellectual.

enslaved parentage to receive a Ph.D. in history from Harvard University, Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) believed that through studying African American history, which contained alternative perspectives to dominant notions of truth, "real education" would serve as a site of political resistance to eradicate white and black racialized polarities. For Woodson "real education" was emancipatory education. By informing students who they are, what they have done, and what they must do, Woodson held that "real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better" (p. 29). Woodson argued that through real education a cultural revolution would be incited, shattering the dispositions that made Nadir possible.

In this chapter, I situate Carter G. Woodson's notion of real education as the theoretical backdrop for this dissertation while simultaneously reimagining his theory to suit the needs of contemporary urban African American learners. Divided into three sections, section one entitled, "From Prodigy to Educator" gives a brief biographical account of Woodson's life. Particularly, I document various episodes in Woodson's life that I believe aided him in developing his theory of real education. Section two, entitled "Woodson's Real Education," contextualizes the construction of raced bodies in an effort to highlight and promote Woodson's call necessitating alternative claims to a truth. In section three, "Real Education Resurrected and Re-imagined," I problematize Woodson's use of African American history to name real education. Additionally, this section re-imagines Woodson's philosophy through oral



history as a site for political resistance to embrace real education with contemporary urban African American learners.

### **From Prodigy to Educator**

Carter G. Woodson was born on December 19, 1875, in New Canton, Virginia, to Anne Eliza and James Henry Woodson. His mother was a literate woman and Woodson's first teacher (Goggin, 1993/1997). Among many valued lessons, she provided her son with what Booker Peeks (1990) refers to as "skills education" (p. 14). In Going to School: the African American Experience, Peek held that skills education teaches reading, writing, and arithmetic. Since African Americans were often denied literacy, skills education, consisting of communicable codes of the United States' dominant linguistic discourse, enabled formerly enslaved non-literate Africans and African Americans to decode meanings.

Although his mother, Anne Eliza, was Woodson's first teacher, she was not his only instructor. His father, James Henry Woodson, was also very influential in shaping their son's early life lessons. Teaching Woodson that "to accept insult, to compromise on principle, to mislead your fellow man, or to betray your people, you have lost your soul" (Woodson, 1944, p. 35), James Henry's tutelage supplied Woodson with functional education. Explaining functional education, William Watkins (1993), in "Black Curriculum Orientations: A Preliminary Inquiry," holds:

[P]reparation of life is at the center of the functionalist curriculum. Consistent with colonial education, functionalism is typically basic, largely oral, and frequently includes folklore as part of its curriculum. Learning occurs through imitation, recitation,

**memorization, and demonstration. A functionalist curriculum shuns abstractions. It is tied to the practical, the useful, and the demonstrable. (p. 325)**

**Indoctrinated with his parents' lessons, in 1892, Woodson left home to work in West Virginia's coal mines. While working in the mines, he met an African American miner named Oliver Jones, whose home contained a library of Negro literature and was a gathering place for African American intellectuals living in West Virginia's coal mine community (Woodson, 1944). Often in this atmosphere, Woodson engaged in discussions on the history of the race with local ministers. Sister Scally (1985) contends that Woodson was fascinated by these exchanges and wanted to know more about the history of his people.**

**Without formal education,<sup>15</sup> John Clarke (1985) observes that Woodson "mastered all the fundamentals of common subjects by the time he was seventeen" (p. 166). At age twenty, Woodson moved to Huntington, West Virginia, with his parents and enrolled in Frederick Douglas High School. Two years later, he completed his studies at Douglas and received his diploma in 1897. In the fall of 1897, he enrolled in Berea College, an interracial institution, in Berea, Kentucky. In 1898, Woodson left Berea to teach in Winona, West Virginia, where black miners had established a school for their children. In 1900, he returned home once more to his alma mater, Frederick Douglas High School, teaching and later serving there as principle.**

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**<sup>15</sup>Here, I refer to education gained through the institution of schools.**

Each Sunday morning, while living in Huntington West Virginia, Woodson carried his father's breakfast to the roadway shop where his father worked. At the roadway shop, Woodson listened to conversations between his father and other black and white workers, all of whom were Civil War veterans. Through their exchanges, Woodson (1944) claimed, he became privy to information omitted from traditional history books, such as the relationship among black and white soldiers and the battle strategies used by infantry. Additionally, in this space, Woodson developed a passion for oral history. Jacqueline Goggin (1993/1997), holds that these narratives later influenced tenets of Woodson's philosophy of history, which held that an "accurate understanding of the past would enlighten the present generation" (p. 121).<sup>16</sup>

After returning to Berea in 1902, and graduating one year later with a bachelor's degree in literature, Woodson traveled to the Philippines to teach Filipino students<sup>17</sup> in the fall of that same year (Goggin, 1993/1997, p.16). Sister Scally (1985) reveals that, while voyaging to the Philippines, Woodson met a missionary who warned him against Americanizing Filipino learners. Filipino students were required to use the Baldwin Primer, which featured red

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<sup>16</sup>Although the use of the term "accurate" may seem misleading, what I believe Woodson was positing is that multiple perspectives of an event enables one to better understand an event.

<sup>17</sup>In 1898, the Treaty of Paris ended the Spanish-American War. As a consequence of the Treaty of Paris, the Philippine Islands were brought under United States jurisdiction. In addition to United States military rule occupying the island, a superintendent of schools was appointed to recruit American teachers, who were supposed to train the Filipinos to govern themselves.

apples, polar bears, and blizzards, all unknown in the Philippines. Bothered by the irrelevance and disconnectedness of this material, and forewarned against Americanization, Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) declared that in order for a real educator to teach intelligently, she/he must first study the history, language, manners, and customs of the people being taught. He argued a real educator did not teach children to sing "Come Shake the Apple Tree," when they had never seen an apple, but rather sing "Come Shake the Lomboy Tree," something they had actually often done. Further, he held that real educators spoke with students of their own native heroes, such as Jose Rizal, instead of Washington and Lincoln ( p. 153). After serving as supervisor of schools and being in charge of teacher-training, Woodson became ill in 1907 and resigned his position in the Philippines. He returned home to recover.

Once well, Woodson ventured on a six- month journey to Africa, Asia, and Europe. While traveling, he studied educational methods, visited libraries, and met with scholars, who later assisted him in research on African American history. Inspired by his journey, in the fall of 1907, Woodson enrolled at the University of Chicago to obtain a second bachelor's degree in history and a Master of Arts in history, Romance languages, and literature. Completing his studies in 1908, Woodson was encouraged by his professors to pursue a doctoral degree in history at Harvard University. To support himself while attending Harvard, Woodson taught American history, French, Spanish, and

English at M Street, later named Dunbar High School, in Washington, D.C.<sup>18</sup>

Potter and Claytor (1997), in African Americans Who Were First, maintain that while teaching in D.C., Woodson found “that his students knew very little about the contributions made by African Americans to the history and culture of their country” (p. 41).

His students' mis-education at M Street mirrored Woodson's experience at Harvard. With professors excluding the contributions of African Americans, Woodson found Harvard troubling and bothersome. Woodson's take on American history, which included the presence, influence, and participation of African Americans in America's history, was often contrary to the more racist sagas professed by his history professor and dissertation chairperson, Edward Channing. Woodson challenged Channing's views on history, and Channing, asserting that the Negro had no history, challenged Woodson to go and find out otherwise. After much strife, having had his initial dissertation draft denied, and changing doctoral committee chairs from Channing to Albert B. Hart and back to Channing, Woodson received his Ph.D from Harvard in 1912. His dissertation, entitled The Disruption of Virginia, argued that class conflicts among whites and enslavement were the economic causes of the struggle between the eastern aristocracy and the western frontiersmen (1912). Goggin (1993/1997) and Scally (1985)

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<sup>18</sup>Anna Julia Cooper, another renowned African American educator, also was an instructor at Dunbar and later served as principal.

contend that Woodson's trials and tribulations with racism at Harvard haunted him. In addition, Clarke (1985) asserts:

After serving many years as a teacher in public schools, Woodson became convinced that the role of his people in American history and in the history of other cultures was being either ignored or misrepresented (p. 167)

Due to these events, Woodson became obsessed with real education.

### **Woodson's Real Education**

In The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon (1963) held that in order for colonialized subjects to be convinced of their subordination they had to believe in their inferiority. Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) argued that modern education made this inferiority complex possible. He states:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to standards of other peoples. (p. xiii)

Specifically, speaking on behalf of African American's education, Woodson claimed that inferiority was indoctrinated by omitting black history from students' education. Through modern education rooted in racist claims to truth,<sup>19</sup> Woodson asserted that African American students, specifically, were convinced of their inferiority. Further, Woodson (1922/1928b; 1928a/1958) maintained that concealing Negro history was necessary for those who had been subjugated to believe in their inferiority and those who were subjugators

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<sup>19</sup>Here, I am referring to tales that claimed the mental incapacities of African and African American people.

to believe in their superiority. Hence, he argued, knowledge of the history of the Negro, as inventors of civilizations, discoverers of iron, domesticators of goat, sheep, and cattle, and founders of great universities like those found in Timbuktu and Songhay, would refute racist claims of Negroes' intellectual inferiority and de-legitimate racist notions used to school all students, both black and white. Referring here to African American history as history of the people, Woodson (1922/1928b) writes in the preface of The Story of the Negro Retold:

In proportion as Americans and Europeans become removed from such nonsense as the Nordic myth and race superiority, they will increase their interest in the history of other peoples who have accomplished just as much good as they have. So long handicapped by this heresy, however, they still lack the sense of humor to see the joke in thinking that one race has been divinely selected to do all of the great things on this earth and to enjoy most of its blessings.

Thus, for Woodson, Negro history was the medium for erasing racism. Negro history was the venue for real education.

### **Metaphysics and Consciousness: Real Education**

After their emancipation, poverty engulfed millions of African Americans. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) held that African Americans' predicament was a consequence of African Americans being convinced of their inferiority. He argued that modern education taught African Americans that "[their] black face was a curse and that [their] struggle to change [their] condition [was] hopeless" (p. 3). Woodson claimed that, schooled with these lessons through modern education African American people became

convinced of their subordination and of their inability to change their situations. Specifically, in the Mis-Education of the Negro, Woodson wrote:

[T]he philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, to handicap, and to kill the oppressed. Negroes daily educated in the tenets of such a religion of the strong have accepted the status of the weak as divinely ordained, and during the last three generations of their nominal freedom have done practically nothing to change it.  
(p. xii)

Through schooling governed by colonialist supervision, like most historically marginalized subjects, African Americans were cursed with invisibility and erased from knowing. Wiped from history, modern education informed African Americans that they were not entitled to social, political, or economic privileges because they did not exist. Vail and White (1991) express that, in 1904, anthropologist Dudley Kidd argued that Negroes were nonexistent because they had no history, and thus lacked the mental capacity to remember. Specifically, Kidd insisted:

Africans were not fit subjects for historical research because, being stunted and uncreative by nature, they neither possessed a history nor had any sense of change taking place with the passage of time.  
(p. 7)

Consequently, in institutions in the Northern and Western Hemispheres, "the Negro was unworthy of consideration" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a, p. 3). However, Woodson believed that a means to subvert racist knowledge was through studying the Negro. Specifically, he asserted:

[I]n our system from the elementary school throughout the university, you would never hear Africa mentioned except in



the negative. You would never thereby learn that Africans first domesticated the sheep, goat, and cow, developed the idea of trial by jury, produced the first stringed instruments, and gave the world its greatest boon in the discovery of iron. You would never know that prior to the Mohammedan invasion about 1000 A.D., these natives in the heart of Africa had developed powerful kingdoms which were later organized as the Songhay Empire on the order of that of the Romans and boasting of similar grandeur. (p. 22)

Hence, w/rihting African American history, for Woodson, served to decolonialize minds. Franz Fanon (1963) maintained that decolonialization is "the replacing of a certain species of men with another species of men" (p. 35). For Woodson, decolonialization was the praxis of real education. As pedagogy, real education used epics of an honorable African American past to "foster social reconstruction by helping students [and others] become creative, critical thinkers and active social participants ... capable of redefining the nature of their own lives in the society in which they live[d]" (Gordon, 1993, p. 264). Thus, by subverting traditional historical discourses with the knowledge of African and African American history, Woodson professed that real education "would dramatize the life of the race and thus inspire it to develop from within a radicalism of its own" (1998b, p. 54). In other words, by schooling African American learners with their history, real education enables them to recognize the lies inherent in colonialist claims to truth, to become self-determined, and to instigate social change. Franz Fanon (1963) in The Wretched of the Earth declares that self-determination is fundamental in overcoming strongholds of colonialization. He writes:

[When] the native discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same as those of the settler, he finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner. All the new revolutionary assurance of the native stems from it. For, if in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone. I am no longer on tenter hooks in his presence; in fact, I don't give a damn for him. (p. 45)

Woodson held that self-determination was the most critical component of real education because it encouraged "African-American people to truly think for themselves and act in their community's own true interest" (Gordon, 1993, p. 274). Moreover, Woodson (1933/1990/1998) believed that "the education of any people should begin with the people themselves" (p. 32). And, consequently, he asserted that "real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin life as they find and make it better" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a, p. 29). Hence, Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) stressed the importance of couching lessons learned in the experience of the knower. This educational tenet concerning the role of experience in education was also made by John Dewey. In the next section, I give attention to both Woodson's and Dewey's philosophy on the role of experience in education.

### **Woodson and Dewey: On Experience**

Both Carter G. Woodson (1933/1998) and John Dewey theorized the role of experience in education. However, because their understandings of experience and experiencing were cloaked by their unique subjectivities, in

my view, Woodson's and Dewey's theories were not at all similar. Woodson held that the role of experience in education should serve to counter truth claims professed by racist hegemonic discourses. Dewey (1916/1966), though arguing that experience in education should be seen as communicable and in constant mutation embracing a group's social aims,<sup>20</sup> also held that

Men live in a community in virtue of things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community of society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge--a common understanding--"like-mindedness" as the sociologists say. (p. 4)

For Dewey, shared interest was a major tenet in his notion of democracy. He states, "Since democratic society repudiates the principle of external authority, it must find a substitute in voluntary disposition and interest; these can be created only by education" (p. 87). Dewey believed that constituents had to possess mutual or common interests in order to participate in democratic relations (1916/1966). Additionally, although he saw interests changing over time, and maintained that values were not static,<sup>21</sup> he believed there must be shared values in order to have a democracy. I contend that the threat of anarchy becomes paramount for Dewey when experience is not governed by education and results in his focus on a shared common strand among a

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<sup>20</sup> For specific citation, please reference Dewey (1916/1966) Democracy and Education pp. 6, 7-8, 208, 217, and 232 as well as Dewey (1938/1963) Experience and Education.

<sup>21</sup> See Dewey (1939), Freedom and Culture.

democratic citizenry. This common strand is achieved through education used as a means to "give individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social change without introducing disorder" (p. 99). For Dewey, social change meant educating constituents so that democratic ideals of mutual and common interest as well as interaction and intercourse could be realized. But, "social change without introducing disorder" meant educating an American citizenry by molding them to embrace certain cultural aspects necessary for maintaining Americanism, a Euro perspective realized in schools through cultural domination.

Dewey wrote:

Beings who are born not only unaware of but quite indifferent to the aims and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap. (p. 3)

Dewey believed that the purpose of education was to indoctrinate particular cultural dispositions into the young of a given society. He argued that education in its most deliberate form was to make a "conscious effort by some organized group to shape the conduct and the emotional intellectual disposition of its young" (as quoted in Childs, 1989, p. 420). Additionally, Dewey (1916/1966) maintained that education was so important that "unless pains are taken to see that genuine and thorough transmission takes place, the most civilized nations will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery" (pp. 3-4). Dewey's concern for education, in my view, is realized through colonial polarities. *[U]nless pains are taken...the most civilized nations will relapse*

*into barbarism and then into savagery.* His posture posits “civilized” and “savage” as binary opposites. Hence, in my view, Dewey also positioned experience in education, in binary opposition, either transmitting the knowledge of the “civilized” or regressing to the knowledge of the “savage.” Consequently, in arguing on behalf of civilized knowing, Dewey likewise argues in favor of transmitting cultural dispositions of a people who oppressed and enslaved women and people of color around the globe. Further expounding this posture, Vail and White (1991) state that binary oppositions, that is, either/or’s, were formed during colonialization to distinguish “they/imperialist” from “us/subjects.” Vail and White write:

It was in this [imperialist] intellectual climate, with its concern for constructing boundaries between “civilized” and “primitives” and with its wide acceptance of Social Darwinism, that the discipline of anthropology, dedicated to describing and explaining “their” cultures to “us” began to be professionalized. At one and the same time, Native Americans, Australian aborigines, Pacific islanders, Asians, and Africans came to be the subjects of racist discourse, the victims of imperial expansion, and the objects of study of anthropology, the very existence of which was based on the assumption that “they” differed in fundamental ways from “us.” (p.4)

Crafted by anthropologists through the use of the theory of evolution, these binaries<sup>22</sup> made fixed a relationship between civilized colonialists and their savage subjects. Moreover, establishing the distance between good and evil, these binaries worked to justify colonialization, enslavement, and oppression. Further, these binaries were/are also operating to control colonialized and

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<sup>22</sup> Please note, however, that throughout Dewey’s text Experience and Education, which was later written in 1938, Dewey is very poignant in disrupting the necessity of either-ors.

enslaved subjects' thinking and placate their actions (Fanon, 1963; Stoler, 1995; Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a). In contrast, Woodson (1933/1998) concluded:

The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker people.  
(p. xii)

Dewey held that in order for social and political transformation to take place, the masses had to be educated; otherwise, "influence which educates some into masters, [will] educate others into slaves" (1916/1966, p. 84). In other words, Dewey claimed that those with education would rule those without education and a dichotomous relationship between the oppressed and oppressor would remain deeply entrenched in our democratic society. Dewey's claim was seen as visionary and progressive for the time.<sup>23</sup> However, necessitating that the colonizers' truths and experiences be transmitted through education, Dewey disregarded the effects of modern education on "the souls of black folks."<sup>24</sup> Though I am mindful of Dewey's participation as a chartered member of the National Association for the

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<sup>23</sup> Starting from the late 1800's, public education was free but not easily accessible to all. Dewey's position, which advocated the education of the masses, was seen as extremely progressive.

<sup>24</sup> Taken from title of Dubois (1903/1995) The Souls of Black Folks.

Advancement of Color People<sup>25</sup> and I am particularly fascinated by his address delivered to the National Negro Conference in 1909, in which he refuted general claims of social heredity used to support racism. Nonetheless, even in this address, Dewey (as quoted in Boydston, 1977) argued:

that acquired characteristics are not transmitted becomes a very encouraging doctrine because it means, so far as individuals are concerned, that they have a full, fair and free social opportunity.  
( pp. 156-157)

Earlier in his message, Dewey stated that "acquired characteristics of heredity [are] capacities which the individual acquired through his life and training."

By "acquired characteristics," Dewey meant capabilities by individuals; by "home life training," he meant previous generations. Thus, for me, in making the above statement, Dewey is suggesting that individuals ignore the wisdoms of those who came before them.<sup>26</sup> From my perspective, Dewey's argument before the National Negro Conference contradicted his stance in Democracy and Education. Specifically, in Democracy and Education, Dewey (1916/1966) stated that transmission is necessary if a group is to remain in existence. Specifically, he maintained:

[T]here is the necessity that immature members be not merely physically preserved in adequate numbers, but that they be in-

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<sup>25</sup> See West (1991), p. 144; Westbrook (1991), p. 167 and Rockefeller (1991), pp. 270-291.

<sup>26</sup> I hold that Dewey's stance before the 1909 National Negro Conference also contradicts his (1916/1966) concerns regarding history in Democracy and Education. In Democracy and Education, Dewey held "The use of history for cultivating a socialized intelligence constitutes its moral significance. It is possible to employ it as a kind of reservoir of anecdotes to be drawn on to inculcate special moral lessons on this virtue or that vice" (p. 217).

initiated into the interests, purposes, information, skills and practices of the mature member: otherwise the group will cease its characteristic life. <sup>27</sup> (p.3)

Dewey's address, in my view, like his purpose for experience in education, elevates one knowing while subordinating another and, likewise, educated some to be masters and others to be slaves.<sup>28</sup>

Charlene Seigfried (1996) asserts that Dewey's lack of sensitivity is consequent of the subjective nature of his own experience. Specifically, she argues that Dewey "himself is not a member of any group whose experience has been systematically distorted and therefore has not developed a sensitivity to some specific limitations of his own experiential understandings" (170). Hence, Dewey's *being* shaped his vision of experience and education through the lens of American colonialism. However, Woodson's *being* instigated his call to visualize experience and education as a tool for de-colonialization. Woodson theorized from what Boisvert calls "tragic dimension in human reality" (Haskins and Seiple, 1999, p.xiv).<sup>29</sup> Tragic dimensions in

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<sup>27</sup> Please note that I present this citation not to suggest that informing younger generations of their history is not vital to the existence of a people or social group. Rather, I site this citation here to more vividly express a contradiction in Dewey's posture in Democracy and Education and his address at the National Negro Conference.

<sup>28</sup> However, by the early 1920's Steven Rockefeller (1991) notes that "The war experience and his travels in Japan and China led Dewey in the early nineteen-twenties to study the psychological, social, political, and economic causes of racism, which he described as a 'social disease,' and to explore ways of overcoming it."

<sup>29</sup> In "Dewey Reconfigured," Casey Haskins (1999) provides a critical analysis of John Dewey's notion of experience presented by Raymond Boisvert. In this article, Haskins shares that Dewey had often been challenged by his critics for "his failure to give due attention to the tragic dimension in human experience." Specifically, she states Boisvert argues that Dewey's



human experiences are those experiences of Native American, African American, Asian American, and Latin American people who were mutilated, silenced, and exploited as a result of Anglo-American colonialization, conquest, or enslavement. Further, like Woodson (1933/1990/1998a), Fanon (1963) , Freire (1970/1997), hooks (1992) and countless others, I argue that as a consequence of Anglo-American colonialization, conquest, and enslavement, the epistemologies of African Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans are those deemed educable, but not educative, in United States schooling. In real education, Woodson uses black history to resurrect the memories of those historically silenced in an effort to incite social change. However, Woodson was not alone in theorizing a model of education for African Americans. W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington were also widely acclaimed for their efforts.

### **Contesting Boundaries/Forging Spaces**

Woodson's notion of real education resonated with the theories of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. These two African American philosophers precede Woodson in generating theoretical claims on behalf of African Americans (Gordon, 1993). Both theorists' postures were formed immediately following the emancipation of formerly enslaved African Americans. Booker T. Washington, an accomodationalist and renowned supporter of industrial education, maintained that African Americans needed

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basic pragmatic vision of the natural and cultural history of intelligence was shaped by a "Baconian optimism about the perfectibility of mankind which resisted acknowledging the primordial tension between mind and necessity--between human powers and reaches of nature which are residually resistant to human will." (xiv)

to be apolitical and be provided with education that enhanced their efficiency in the fields of agriculture and domestic science.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, W.E. B. DuBois, a supporter of classical liberal education, argued that African Americans' "book learning" needed to be an impetus for racial uplift and provide "the talented tenth" with faculties for political participation (Anderson, 1988). Hence, according to Dubois, education should bestow onto the leaders of our race "analytical and critical faculties to help students become worldly, tolerant, and capable of significant societal participation.... and planned transformation" (Watkins, 1993, p. 328). In my view, Woodson's notion of real education borrowed from and reshaped both Washington's and DuBois' perspectives. Like Washington, Woodson held that Negroes should learn to be more efficient in those occupations in which they were granted employment; that is, agriculture, domestic science, and later industry during the 1930's (Woodson, 1928a/1958, p. 287). And, like DuBois, Woodson believed that an educated class was necessary for promoting novelties of thought which would advance the African American race (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a). However, Woodson (1998b) asserted that neither industrial nor classical education prepared African Americans for "what they must do" (p. 44) He argued that industrial education for African Americans was merely the mastering of techniques which had been discarded by industries and that classical education's disciplines served only to indoctrinate self-hate

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<sup>30</sup> After Emancipation, these were the primary areas where African Americans were granted employment.

in “educated Negroes” as well as contempt for their African American brothers and sisters. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) maintained:

Neither [Industrial education] nor the struggling higher institutions of a classical order established about the same time, however, connected the Negroes very closely with life as it was. These institutions were concerned rather with life as they hoped to make it. When the Negro found himself deprived of influence in politics, therefore, and at the same time unprepared to participate in the higher functions in the industrial development which this country began to undergo, it soon became evident to him that he was losing ground in the basic things of life. He was spending his time studying about the things which had been or might be, but he was learning little to help him to do better the tasks at hand.  
(p. 11)

Woodson's vision for African American education and racial uplift was neither pessimistic nor optimistic. Rather, in my view, it was simply pragmatic, “wrought out of the reality and history of the African-American experience in America” (Gordon, 1993, p. 273). The experience that guided and propelled Woodson's philosophy was African Americans' destitution. Hence, Woodson declared that real education was not only about history, but a preparation for African Americans in “economic-self preservation” (quoted in Greene, 1930, p.346)

### **Education Worthwhile**

Like Marcus Garvey, Woodson felt that “as long as one race is white and the other black there will always be a race problem. The races must either amalgamate or separate” (Woodson, 1922/1928b; p. 554). He believed that as long as there was a race problem, then the Negroes, dependent on a racist system in which whites were taught to despise them, would always be

economically impoverished. Throughout his work, Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) challenged African Americans to be self-sufficient. He admonished African Americans not to be dependent on a system where racism inhibits their economic mobility, keeps them impoverished, and denies them the opportunity to make a living. He was convinced that African Americans should do for themselves, independent of white control. For " [t]he Negro will never be able to show all of his originality as long as his efforts are directed from without by those who socially proscribe him. Such 'friends' will unconsciously keep him in the ghetto" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a, p. 28) Woodson solicited a remedy for African Americans' economic impoverishment through instructions of cooperative economics, urging black business persons to hire only black workers and for black people to patronize only black-owned businesses. He asked African Americans trained in classical education and those with industrial training to seek occupations that would foster self-preservation. Moreover, vexed that "the education of the [African American] masses had not enabled them to advance very far in making a living" (p. 16), Woodson (1998) informed real educators that:

[T]he only education worthwhile is that which prepares a [person] for what he will have to do. [Y]outh, then, should not be educated away from [their] environment. [They] should be trained to lay a foundation for the future in [their] present situation, out of which [they] may grow into something above and beyond [their] beginnings. (p. 290)

Woodson argued that real education should teach African Americans how to

make a living. In his book chapter, "The Failure To Learn To Make A Living,"

Woodson (1933/1998) maintained:

What Negroes are now being taught does not bring their minds into harmony with life as they must face it. When a Negro student works his way through college by polishing shoes he does not think of making a special study of the science underlying the production and distribution of leather and its products so that he may some day figure in this sphere. The Negro boy sent to college by a mechanic seldom dreams of learning mechanical engineering to build upon the foundation his father has laid, that in years to come he may figure as a contractor or a consulting engineer. The Negro girl who goes to college hardly wants to return to her mother if she is a washerwoman, but this girl should come back with sufficient knowledge of physics and chemistry and business administration to use her mother's work as a nucleus for a modern steam laundry (p. 39).

One quintessential element in real education is teaching students how to make a living. Woodson was concerned with the economic impoverishment that swallowed most African American communities. He had witnessed and researched hundreds of African Americans who had been reduced to vagabondage and peonage because modern education had not sufficiently trained them for work, and many white-controlled enterprises would not hire Negroes as laborers (1932). Hence, Woodson fervently believed that any education worthwhile provided students with an occupation.

Through real education, Woodson (1928/1958) claimed that "[real educators] must hold up before [students] examples of their own people, who have done things worthwhile" (p. iii). Hence, in real education, Woodson advocated re-telling of a Euro-centered tale from a silenced African and African American perspective and using black voices to reeducate the

masses. Additionally, bothered that modern, classical, and liberal education had missed the mark in preparing African Americans for economic mobility, Woodson maintained that real education informed its learners how to sustain a living.

### **Real Education Resurrected and Re-imagined**

During the mid-to-late eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century, fabricated white/black polarities established clear-cut divides for elevating or degrading white/black subjectivities (Cabral, 1970; Fanon, 1963; Vail and White, 1991; Wynters, 1996). In this space, Dr. Carter G. Woodson's theory of real education was born as a catalyst for change. He declared that knowledge in black history would instigate black self-love and cooperative economics in African American communities, thus releasing white supremacy's power over African Americans' well being. Yet, situated in today's more complicated junctures-- a time when white/ black subjectivities collude and collide with a plethora of "nonsynchronous"<sup>31</sup> identities-- Woodson's particularly revolutionary posture may not seem so emancipating.

Though Woodson's endeavor to wright Black history is significant, it is nonetheless problematic. The process and outcome of "create[ing] knowledge" is a very powerful and complex venture (Foucault in Ransom, 1997). Creating knowledge constitutes a complicated dilemma, manifesting itself through the final decision to determine what will be included and what

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<sup>31</sup>See Cameron McCarthy (1990/1993). Also a contextual description is provided in the upcoming sub-section.

will be excluded in the “creation” of her/his-stories (Sawicki, 1991). However, relying upon a few great tales to determine whose knowledge is worth knowing and whose experiences count, Woodson’s selective historiography is, in my view, equally as exclusive as the traditional white-controlled and white-dominant school curricula he sought to reform.

Woodson’s practice of inclusion/exclusion parallels what James Loewen (1995) refers to as “heroification.” According to Loewen, “heroification is a degenerative process that makes people over into heroes. Through a heroifying technique, our educational media turns flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest” (9). I hold that a consequence of heroification is that pieces of an experience are made immortal as they become integrated into a school’s curricula and passed down to students from generation to generation. Unfortunately, as Petra Munro (1998a) reveals:

[H]istory retains the illusion of a seamless narrative written by an omniscient, invisible narrator. In other words, history remains grounded in an epistemology based on objectivity, and the very categories of history which have functioned to make [historically marginalized subjects] invisible remain intact. (p. 266)

Borrowing from Joan Kelly (1984), Munro (1998a) describes “doing history” in this manner as compensatory. Through a raced compensatory history, recognizing particular histories is a means of essentializing what it means to be black. Writing about the effects of compensatory history on the experiences of women, Munro (1998a) maintains, “[T]he diversity of women’s experiences is not only ignored, but what becomes obscured is that ‘woman’

itself is a social construction, a product of discourse. Events or selves, in order to exist, must be encoded as story elements" (p. 266). Consequently, in addition to writing/righting<sup>32</sup> African Americans into the curriculum, Woodson heroizes a way of knowing blackness experienced by a few great members of the African American race while relegating the epistemologies of many other African Americans to the margins.

While Woodson's theoretical argument of centering African and African Americans' history to disrupt racist claims to truth was legitimate, his practice was limited with regard to recognizing the complexity of identities' subjugation and realizing their role in emancipatory pedagogy. Woodson failed to acknowledge that the United States is not only a white supremacist society, but it is also a capitalistic patriarchy (hooks, 1989, p. 116). Moreover, as he perceived that subjugation and identities are social constructions, Woodson did not discern that, as social constructs, identities and subjugation are not monolithic. Identities and subjugation are products of discourse and therefore, are predicated by history/time (Marx in Ransom, 1998, p. 110). Hence, Woodson's premise in today's context ignores the complexity of race and how gender, class, and a myriad of other "nonsynchronous" (McCarthy, 1990/1993) identities obscure essentialized notions of any subjectivity or identity (e.g., black/white, rich/poor, female/male) and complicate visions for social change (Nicholson and Seidman, 1995). In my view, Woodson's conception of history and real education neglects problematizing static

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<sup>32</sup>See Munro (1998a) in Curriculum: Towards New Identities ed. William F. Pinar.



notions of what it means to be black or to appreciate blackness in the curriculum. Although Woodson's purpose for inclusion was to boost the self esteem of African American youths and others who had been historically silenced through schooling<sup>33</sup> practices, I assert that his act of creating knowledge also concretized static notions of whose knowledge is worth knowing and whose experiences count.

In deciding whose knowledge was worth knowing and whose experiences count, Woodson packaged what he felt students should know. He propagandized his praxis of real education. In so doing, Woodson negated students' agency to name and disrupt knowing for themselves. Freire (1970/1993) notes:

The revolutionary leaders must realize that their own conviction of the necessity for struggle... was not given to them by anyone else-- if it is authentic. This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached, rather, by means of a totality of reflection and action. Only the leaders' own involvement in reality, within a historical situation, led them to criticize this situation and wish to change it.

Likewise, the oppressed... [m]ust reach this conviction as Subjects, not as objects. They also must intervene critically in the situation which surrounds them and whose mark they bear; propaganda cannot achieve this. (p. 49)

Identity and subjectivity help shape how one views and experiences the world (Seigfried, 1991). Woodson's heroifications were constructions of knowledge articulated through perceptions of his world view. Used to contest racist knowledge of his lived experiences, his heroifications served to

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<sup>33</sup>Shujaa (1994) maintains that schooling is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements (15).

enlighten Woodson, making him a proponent for social change. Yet, in passing out his knowing, Woodson obstructs students' opportunity to intervene critically in and through their lived experiences in order to develop a critical consciousness of their own.

### **Embracing Multiplicity: Oral History**

In *Sankofa: Stories of Power, Hope, and Joy*, Jawanza Kunjufu (1998) states that "History is a clock by which a people measure their greatness" (p.17). When urban African American students use oral history to document the tales of their cultural community, through the voices of other urban African Americans, in my view, oral history empowers them to right/write historical narratives of their greatness<sup>34</sup>. Through oral history, historians return to the source, to the grass roots, to gather information about a topic or an event of their interest (Thompson, 1978). From the mouths of informants who actually lived the events, historians historicize sagas that are left out of most recorded histories. These are sagas referred to by D. Soyini Madison (1998) as theories of the flesh.<sup>35</sup> According to Madison:

Theories of the flesh mean that the cultural, geopolitical, and economic circumstances of our lives engender particular experiences and epistemologies that provide philosophies or "theories" about reality different from those available to other groups. (p. 319)

I contend that Madison's notion of theories of the flesh when cited provides

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<sup>34</sup> By greatness, I am not referring to some romanticized African American tale. Here, I once again refer to the narratives of survival--what I refer to as sagas of resistance.

<sup>35</sup> A concept borrowed by Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga (1983) in *This Bridge Called Me Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

students with sites to politically resist dominant notions of traditional history. I equate the historicity of theories of the flesh with sagas of contradiction.

African Americans have historically been subjected to political, economic, and social oppression (Franklin and Moss, 1994). In my view, our sagas of contradiction often render sites for political resistance to most traditional assumptions on knowing and history. Hence, by gathering and documenting sagas of contradiction, African American learners not only see themselves in the curriculum, but they also study the history of their community and learn about and through the social realities which may have aided in creating their ghettoized conditions.<sup>36</sup> Learners also grapple with solutions for making their lived situations better. When used in this way, I hold that oral history exemplifies "real education" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a, p. 29). Woodson held that "real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly to begin with life as they find it and make it better" (p. 29). I equate Woodson's use of real education to emancipatory pedagogy. Referring to emancipatory pedagogy as citizenship education, Beverly Gordon (1993) shares that emancipatory pedagogy

fosters social reconstruction, by helping students (and others) to become creative, critical thinkers and active social participants, and to become capable of redefining the nature of their own lives in the society in which they live. (p. 264)

By gathering, reflecting, and documenting these stories, oral history as real education can be imagined as a site to politically resist dominant notions on

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<sup>36</sup>"Ghettoized" here refers to poverty-stricken, gang- and drug-infested communities common to many urban centers in the United States today.

knowing while serving as an instrument for emancipatory pedagogy. In oral history as real education, students learn through listening and actively engaging with people who actually lived events of their interests and are a part of students' communities. Specifically, like oral history as pedagogy, students/historians "sit at the feet of others who, because they come from a different social class, or are less educated, or older, know more about something" students/historians seek to understand (Thompson, 1978/1988, p. 11). Students gather and organize information that they accumulate from their personal interviews and library research. They analyze and interpret their data and, if they choose, represent their "conclusions" in oral histories that are collected and reproduced in a magazine. One critical exercise in oral history is that students/historians adduce spoken memories of their local communities (Thompson, 1978/88).<sup>37</sup> However, in order for these spoken memories to be history, students must be able to utilize the significance of these tales to better understand their current situations (Dixon, 1994; Nora, 1989; Thompson, 1978/1988). For, I argue, through understanding the significance of spoken memories today, memories are history.

### **Memory as History**

Fabre and O'Meally (1994), in History and Memory in African American Culture, maintain that "compared with the helter-skelter and dreamy impressionism of human memory, history is closer to human knowledge,

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<sup>37</sup>In my view, it is important for students to cite memories of their local communities in order to connect curricula to their communities and communal experiences.

which can fall back on the stability of fact and reasoned truth" (p. 6).

Moreover, they share:

[M]emory is by definition a personal activity, subject to the biases, quirks, and rhythms of the individual's mind. If a remembered event is expressed verbally, the remembrance is of course slanted by the teller's choice of words and by his or her sense of how to shape a tale. [Memory] is a created version of events snatched from the chaos of the otherwise invisible world gone by. History is closer to a scientific field wherein the practitioners routinely insist on proofs and corroborating evidence to support balanced and sober modes of analysis. (pp. 5-6)

In the above, the writers contend that memory is deemed frail and quirked with biases while history is based on proof and corroborative evidence. But, who are the writers of history? What exonerates their human biases and quirks? And more importantly, what about those of us who have been historically deemed ahistorical? Where are the documents located to legitimate our claims to truth and etch our knowing in the w/rightings of history? For this group and others situated in the margins of "history," memory becomes our path for connecting or relaying yesterday's moments today.

Denied written history (Hoopes, 1979), memory fits history when "*lieux de memoire*" <sup>38</sup>or sites of memory(ies) are retrieved. Melvin Dixon (1994) contends that when events call us to remember, they become sites of memory(ies). Borrowing the notion from French historian Pierre Nora, Dixon

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<sup>38</sup> Dixon coined the phrase "*lieux de memoire*" from french historian Pierre Nora (1989). According to Nora, *lieux de memoire* exist where memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists (p.7)

declares that memory becomes history when sites of memory(ies) are retrieved to help us better understand our present situations. He maintains that our quest to "know" sends us on a search for history and causes us to trace sites of memory(ies) (p.18). In other words, Dixon suggests that our search to understand what is happening today beckons us to retrieve sites of yesterday's memory(ies). As we go back and fetch sites of memory(ies) to aid us in comprehending our current situations, memory is the social purpose of history.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Nora (1989) maintains that sites of memory(ies) are investigated in an effort to quench one's insatiable desire to know yesterday so that she/he can better understand today. Thus, those memories which are referenced to breathe clarity in the present moment are history. According to Nora (1989), retrieving memory for the purpose of history is necessary for a fuller understanding of one's corporeal existence in the present. He asserts that, because of breaches and ruptures that are inherent in everyday life experiences, histories which explicate the triumph of Western civilization are no longer adequate in relating the significance of the past to present generations. Specifically, he argues:

[I]n our rapidly changing contemporary societies, our relation to the past has been radically altered. The swift forward pull of modern life instills a feeling of uprootedness and drift. We moderns have to confront the problem of no longer having overarching ideological narratives...for example, the Triumph of Western Civilization... defining what is supposed to be memorable. [Yet] the desire to retrieve the past still endures. Threatened by a sense of discontinuity and forgetfulness,

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<sup>39</sup>Paul Thompson (1978/1988) shares that, through history, ordinary people seek to understand the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives.

we seek new moorings and props, new means of reactivating the process of remembrance as we reach toward a better sense of who we are and whence we have come.  
(p. 7)

For Nora (1989), Dixon (1994) and others<sup>40</sup> these “new moorings and props” are found in sites of memory. Sites of memory(ies) are created through archives and can be found in organized celebrations, poems, dance, songs, stories, and any other expressions of the past that inspire us to remember. Like Woodson’s use of history in real education, sites of memory(ies) become history as we intentionally exercise our will to recollect past events in order to comprehend their significance in a now experience. As a practice of memory as history, the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa, have with grave prudence instructed its members to search memory to help them better understand their present situations. They refer to this fluid, dynamic, theoretical approach to history as *Sankofa*.

### *Sankofa*

*Sankofa* is an *Adinkra* symbol<sup>41</sup> used by the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa. *Adinkra* symbols are stamped on *ayitoma*, funeral cloth worn by friends of the deceased, and adorn the bereaved’s dress. Through *Adinkra* symbols, friends are able to send personal sentiments and literal messages to

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<sup>40</sup>See History and Memory in African American Culture edited by Fabre, G. and O’Meally, R. (1994).

<sup>41</sup> The earliest recorded Western historical source on *Adinkra* is in 1817, when a leader of a British mission to Ghana collected an *Adinkra* cloth in Kumase, West Africa.

the dead in her/his journey to the spiritual world. Although embellishing oneself with *Adinkra* cloth during the mourning of a loved one is one use, it is not the only purpose for *Adinkra* symbols. These symbols may also be used to reflect the cultural values, social mores, and philosophical beliefs of the Akan people (Willis, 1998). One of many *Adinkra* symbols used by the Akan is *Sankofa*. *Sankofa*<sup>42</sup> is a beautiful bird looking behind facing yesterday while dropping an egg in today and walking ahead towards its future. Willis (1998) shares that the Akan liken this action of looking backwards as a symbolic representation of "looking to one's past or with the quest for knowledge, 'returning to the source' (p. 189). For me, the image represents Woodson's solicitation for real education and serves as a warning or a beckoning, so to speak, to live in the present, mindful of one's past and its possible influence in shaping one's future. At first glance, one would think that the image and its discourse are reactive, predetermined by yesterday, but in actuality they are proactive, for the bird is walking forward, heeding the warning, and thus is better informed about its destiny. In my view, when recognized in this way, *Sankofa* is a philosophical tutelage that bids one to fetch sites of memory(ies) in order to better understand their present and prepare one for their future. W. Bruce Willis (1998) in The *Adinkra* Dictionary shares that:

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<sup>42</sup> The image of *Sankofa* is represented in many ways. A few years ago, while walking through a market in Nashville, Tennessee, I happened upon a wood carving of the image of *Sankofa*. The gentleman selling the piece was from Ghana. The *Sankofa* image was of a bird looking backwards while dropping an egg. To this day, the image of this beautiful bird resonates with me and it is this image that I am speaking of when I refer to the term *Sankofa*.



*Sankofa* is the repossession of something that was forgotten and the initiation of a process to return to the place where the object was lost in order to 'fetch it' and 'then move forward' into the future (p.189)

Like memory as history and real education, *Sankofa* is an intentional act of re-membering<sup>43</sup>. *Sankofa* is about re-discovering a past. This ideology is well illustrated in David Abduli's (1995) poem entitled *Sankofa*.

How can we know what we don't know,  
if what we don't know, we ought to know,  
and what we now know is "his-story"  
But what we should know is "our-story."

How can we tell "the-story" of our-story," when "his-story"  
is now "our-story?" How can we even begin to tell "our-story,"  
when we are ignorant of "our-story," or have forgotten "our-story?"

No, we cannot, and should not, and ought not  
accept "his-story" as "our-story."  
Then to revisit our past we must.  
To reclaim "our-story" we are challenged.  
To rewrite "our-story" for posterity is our task.  
So "abibiman *Sankofa*."  
"Se wo yirefi na se wo *Sankofa*, yen kyi"<sup>44</sup>

It's not a shame to revisit the past when you have forgotten  
Neither is it forbidden to learn from the past.  
It's not a crime to borrow from the past.  
Neither is it a taboo to emulate aspects of the past.  
So "abibiman *Sankofa*."  
"Se wo yirefi na se wo *Sankofa*, yen kyi" (49)

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<sup>43</sup>I use the phrase re-membering because I contend that in the act of retrieving a memory, that memory then becomes a part of our own memory. Hence, the initial memory now lost, is remembered in our own minds, through the context of our lived experiences.

<sup>44</sup> (Meaning as translated by Abduli) "It is not taboo when you forget aspects of your culture to revisit the past and fetch that aspect of who you are."

In Black Skin White Masks, Franz Fanon (1967) shares, like Woodson (1933/1990/1998a), that the most effective mechanism of colonialization was to divorce colonized subjects from their cultural origination by destroying the memories of their history. In *Sankofa*, Abduli also refers to this deliberate erasure of history. He posits, through his poem, a recognition of colonizers' tactics used to erase indigenous and enslaved persons. He holds that by silencing their stories and histories, colonialists likewise obliterated their beings. Further, he asserts the necessity for colonized subjects to go back and fetch their story in order to reinscribe their people's her/his-story and have their memories/histories accessible to future generations. Specifically, in this piece Abduli like Woodson's notion of real education, *Sankofa* stresses the importance of going back to fetch sites of memory(ies) in order to right<sup>45</sup> the tales of history.

Yet, despite *Sankofa*'s striking similarities to memory as history and real education, *Sankofa* differs from memory as history as philosophical discourse. In memory as history, one looks at sites of memory(ies) to better understand one's current situations. However, *Sankofa* is not just about retrieving yesterday's memoirs to better understand today. *Sankofa* uses traces of forgotten memories to aid in guiding the decisions of one's future. Eleni Tedla (1996) explicates this understanding, stating that:

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<sup>45</sup>By right I mean to incorporate the histories of historically marginalized and colonized subjects. Also see Petra Munro (1998a) in Curriculum Towards New Identities. William F. Pinar.

*Sankofa* is an Akan word which roughly translates as; 'Return to the source and fetch'. The source is our [African] culture, heritage and identity. It is the power that is within us. *Sankofa* means that as we move forward into the future, we need to reach back into our past and take with us all that works and is positive. (p.1)

For example, in Tedla's (1996) book *Sankofa: African Thought and Education*, she investigates various forms of traditional and indigenous African education as sites of memory(ies) to guide her in developing her philosophy on how to best educate contemporary aboriginal African children.

In *Sankofa: Celebrations for the African American Church*, Dudley and Stewart (1997), likewise, share the importance of going back to fetch what has been lost. They maintain that, due to African Americans dislocation in America, retrieving various African religious rites is an act of survival. Paying homage to those who have encouraged African American people to re-claim Africa<sup>46</sup> as a gesture of affirming an African American self, they assert "we are indebted to scholars and practitioners for urging us to unapologetically reclaim those ritual practices which are essential to the long-term survival and sanity of African Americans as a people in America" (p.x). Hence, Dudley and Stewart (1997) argue the importance of going back and fetching indigenous African religious forms and incorporating these rituals in contemporary African American church ceremonies.

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<sup>46</sup>Here they note Maulana Karenga, and Molefi Asanti. I would add Marcus Garvey. See Judith Stein (1986) *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society*.

Lastly,<sup>47</sup> in *Sankofa Tumi*, Kwabena Ashanti (1999) creates an African American holiday consisting of a nine-day celebration starting at sundown on September 11. *Sankofa Tumi*, means return to the power. During this holiday, descendants of Africa come together to “honor our enslaved ancestors in America and return to the wisdom, values, morals, and sacred rituals of our fore parents-before enslavement” (p. 20).

In each of these episodes, *Sankofa* invites one to deliberately return to sites of memory(ies) in order to translate traces of the past to aid in directing one’s future. Dixon (1994) maintains that “by calling themselves to remember Africa and/or the racial past, black Americans are actually re-membling, as in re-populating broad continuities within the African diaspora. This movement is nonlinear, and it disrupts our notions of chronology” (p. 21).<sup>48</sup> In other words, going back to fetch what you need does not suggest going through point “c” and point “b”, yet this may be the consequence of one’s attempt to excavate the significance of a trace. Retrieving sites of memory in the spirit of *Sankofa* means reaching through any moment in time to take what you need to understand the present by translating a metaphor of the past (Morris, 1998).

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<sup>47</sup> This does not suggest that this is an exhaustive list of the ways Sankofa has been used to represent going back to fetch what one needs from the past to guide one’s future.

<sup>48</sup> I believe it is important for me to note here that as I use Sankofa I am not just talking about returning to Africa to fetch sites of memory, although I do believe that Africa is a rich source. I also believe that lives of native African Americans provide a lucrative nucleus for sites of memories even when being used to direct one’s future paths.

## **Historicizing a Site: Translating a Metaphor**

Melvin Dixon (1994) maintains that "[I]f history as story promotes narratives, then memory, which is often expressed episodically and through visceral imagery independent of chronology, very much like a dream, reveals itself often as a metaphor" (p. 23) What Dixon is saying is that if history as narrative is the re-telling of an event, then the memory of those who lived an event equates a re-presentation of its time. Their memories represent history. Yet, as we look to metaphors to understand our present situation and, perhaps, even use their stories to guide our future endeavors, we must forever remain mindful that a metaphor and the experiences it reflects are couched in a particular moment in time or history. We must be cognizant that a metaphor is subject to the possibilities and limitations of its period. Speaking about the static nature of time as it relates to any possible co-relation to ancestral memories and descendants' lived experiences, Ricour (1988) says:

An ancestor's memory partly intersects with his descendants' memories, and this intersection is produced in a common present that itself can present every possible degree, from the intimacy of a we-relationship to the anonymity of a newspaper clipping. In this way, a bridge is constructed between the historical past and memory by the ancestral narrative that serves as a relay station for memory directed to the historical past, conceived of as the time of people now dead and the time before my own birth. (p. 114)

Though Ricour is aware that an event or memory rests in a particular time period, he asserts that the significance of the event may cross the trajectories of time. He states "[i]f the significance of the trace itself is inscribed in

**geometrical space, this significance is not exhausted by the relations of successive time" (p. 124).**

**In my opinion, Ricour's use of the term "significance" is very arbitrary. What I might find to be significant in an event or site of memory(ies) another might find to be insignificant and vice versa. What another may determine to be significant, I may determine to be pointless. Consequently, arbitrariness exists in determining how the significance of a site of memory(ies) lives on in the present moment. I contend, unlike Woodson's reliance on noteworthy African American historical figures to direct the paths of African American learners, that no one can name significance for you. If they do, then it is not your understanding, but theirs. Hence, history has not been made for you, but for them. The act of retrieving the significance of a site, or the very act of soliciting memory to serve as history, is a very personal and individual endeavor. I maintain, like Freire (1970/1997), that significance is born out of interest. Yet, in spite of the nuances embodied through a language of significance, what is valuable in Ricour's postulate as well as in memory as history is that upon each return to a site, as long as the event speaks to one's present situation, then that site is significant. And, that memory is history. Hence, history is realized as fluid, subjective, and significant. In other words, history becomes that which one needs to know to better understand oneself, others, and the world around them.**

### **Significance of the Trace: Oral History as Real Education**

There are countless oral history projects throughout the nation where students document the memories of their local community members. In Oh Freedom!, elementary students at St. Anthony's Grade School in Washington, D.C., conducted an oral history research project on the civil rights movement. Students interviewed members of their own families and other lay persons in their community. Because student interviewees were not Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, or Malcolm X, the significance of students' traces informed them "that ordinary people working together can change history" (King and Osborne, 1997, p.1). Realized in this light, oral history as real education is a way of particularizing one's identity in the present while at the same time admitting the influences of the past and using these narratives to politically resist dominant assumptions of truth.

## Chapter 3

### It's Oral History

August 24, 1998

*Today was my first day to implement the oral history project at McKinley Senior High School, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I was not nearly as nervous as I usually am at the start of a new school year. All of my students are African Americans. I have nine on my roll. Only eight showed up for the first day of class. For the most part, all I had intended to do today was simply go over the syllabus and tell students the meaning of oral history. My first question of the day was, "Will it be difficult to make an 'A' in this class?" I'm not sure if I ever answered the young man's question. I must confess that his query was annoying and asked against the backdrop of a three-page syllabus whose content requirements included interviewing, indexing, transcribing, and creating a book as well as obtaining a critical understanding of African American history. I'm sure that the young man did not know that his question was so loaded and, for me, very difficult to give a direct answer. I did say that each student had the opportunity to drop if they felt that this was not the course for them, and I also informed them that there will be a lot of work involved in successfully completing an oral history project. None left. So, hopefully, this is a good sign that they are willing to work. I also explained to them that their participation in the course*



*would be a little more difficult and require them to be a little more responsible, since we did not or would not have textbooks to depend upon.*

*As I began reading the syllabus once more, many of them became distracted. I would have given almost anything to be up in their heads to see what they were thinking. When I began to feel that I was totally losing them, I interrupted myself to ask, "Why did you sign up for African American history?" It was as if they were waiting for a moment to talk, to speak, to be heard. One student responded, "To learn about Black people since they weren't talked about in American history." I responded to this answer with "Really?" I think my response puzzled them. I also asked about the difference between the two. "One was about Black people; the other is about White people," they informed me. Again, I responded with "REALLY???" I then asked, "What is African American history?" A fine young man, whose head had been laying down most of the class, raised up and yelled from the back of the room, "African American history is the history of the Black man living in a White man's society." As he spoke, I became excited because he was excited, although I couldn't help but think that he was spitting out some line he had heard in one of the many "boyz in the 'hood" flicks. So to him, I asked, "Do you really believe that this is a White man's society?" All of the students's eyes widened as they asserted, "YEAH!" "How so?" I asked, and they became deaf quiet. We then went back to the syllabus to discuss the topic of Black*

classics. I asked them to name for me a Black classic. The same young man, from the rear of the class, yelled out, "ROOTS!" I couldn't help but be a little tickled. I explained to him that Roots would be considered more a contemporary novel rather than a Black classic. Another student, Bashira, mentioned that Black History Month was the only time that they were given the opportunity to learn anything about Black people. So, when I asked this question, they couldn't answer because they did not know, and they did not know because it was never covered during Black History Month. I then asked, "Who Initiated Black History Month?" Again, the room fell quiet. I gave them a clue. "That person wrote one of your required readings." Bashira responded with, "Carter G. Woodson." "You're correct!" I exclaimed. I assured the young man in the rear that he would probably enjoy reading Woodson's book, The Mis-Education of the Negro, a lil' more than Roots, but, if he choose, he could read Roots.

The only other fellow in the class asked me if I ever watched television and did The Mis-Education of the Negro have a movie version. Again I was tickled. The interesting thing about this young man is that according to the principal he has a three point seven grade point average. I guess he's figured out this schooling game. My response to both of his questions was no. I informed him that I didn't watch T.V. because I didn't want anyone else describing my reality for me. I reminded him and the other students of the news and asked whose faces were most often shown doing criminal

*acts and whose faces were most often shown living Beverly Hill lifestyles. I then shared with them my personal accounts of being followed in department stores and I asked them where was the most likely place that the sales person learned to think that I was a thief. They all replied, "On T.V." The class bell rang. My first day was over, but I never told them what was oral history...*

During our first class meeting, I realized that my students were not willing to be contaminated with "narration sickness" (Freire, 1970/1997, p.52). In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire posits that narration sickness occurs as teachers pour curriculum objectives into receptive students as if they were vacuous vessels waiting to be filled. Moreover, he terms teaching practices which spill knowledge from outside students' lived experiences into students' knowing, as the "banking concept in education" (Freire, 1970/1997, p. 53).

Unlike the students who endured narration sickness, in Freire's (1970/1997) Pedagogy of the Oppressed many of my students would not allow me to pour the meaning of our class or oral history into them. They resisted. By refusing to open their thinking caps, my students shut me out. Because they were unable to connect my learning objectives to their lived experiences, students initially found my course syllabus rhetorical and boring (Delpit and Perry, 1998; Fordham, 1996). Not until I was willing to embrace a dialogic process and use "problem-posing techniques" (Freire, 1970/1997) did students become more open and interested in learning my scope and

sequence for African American Studies. Freire maintains that problem-posing education responds intentionally to the essence of consciousness while, at the same time, rejects commands and embodies communication between and among students and teacher. Problem-posing education is a dialogic process in which . . .

[T]he teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is [herself] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p. 61)

In problem-posing, teachers do not tell students what to do or what to know. Rather, knowing is achieved through a communicative process engaged by both teachers and students. Through our dialogues, a reciprocal relationship evolved between my students and me; that is, students were simultaneously my teacher and I was simultaneously their student. In my view, reciprocity is an inherent quality of oral history and therefore, was the methodological approach for my qualitative study. Divided into four sections: *Teacher as Learner/Students as Teachers: Oral History and Reciprocity*, *Spoken Memories: Oral History*, *Teacher/Learner: Engaging the Field*, and *Researcher/Informant: Doing Data Analysis*, this chapter lays out the methodology I employed to understand students'/historians' experience with oral history as real education.

## **Teacher as Learner/Students as Teachers: Oral History and Reciprocity**

In oral history, those who have been traditionally heralded as knowers (e.g., teachers, adults, and researchers) also become learners, and those who have been traditionally deemed learners (e.g., students, children, and subjects) also become knowers (Grele, 1998). Paul Thompson (1978/1988) states that in oral history, historians come to the interview to learn, "to sit at the feet of others who [because of their experience] know more about something," that the oral historian seeks to understand (p. 11). Consequently, I decided early in my research process that oral history was the most appropriate research design and pedagogical approach for my study. With oral history as my research praxis, students' voices framed my knowing--because they were my teachers and I was their learner. Since I wanted to know how oral history inspires real education with urban African American learners from their perspective, I needed students' knowing to ground my epistemological framing.

### **Spoken Memories: Oral History**

In an effort to disrupt more highly politicized grand narratives of history, oral history operates to contextualize history and problematize traditional notions of a historical truth. Studs Terkel (1998) maintains that "[o]ral history brings alive a past that the written word fails to capture. Its narrators are most often the anonymous makers of history whose lives would be otherwise lost to us" (p. 2). Referring to oral history as spoken memories, James Hoopes (1979) predates Terkel in revealing the usefulness of oral

history in documenting the narratives of those whose stories have been historically marginalized. Hoopes contends that research in oral traditions may be instrumental in [righting/writing his/her stories of] particular or local cultures ....who may not be literate or may have been denied written history because of political oppression" (p. 6). Moreover, Dean, Daspit, and Munro (1998) assert that "oral history is a method of collecting and preserving valuable, often unique, and previously unrecorded information about the past" (p. 3). Ken Burns (1998) holds that "[o]ral history is the front line of our battle for self knowledge and the glue which finally connects each individual's story with everyone else's, creating in its aggregate the tapestry we call history" (p. 2). In addition, Paul Thompson (1978/1988) maintains that oral history, by contrast to traditional notions of history, makes a more fair representation of history possible. Specifically, he states:

[W]itness can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. [Oral history] provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account. In so doing, oral history has radical implication for the social message of history as a whole. (p. 6)

Yet, Thompson (1978/1988) also warns that simply collecting oral narratives does not necessarily make oral history an instrument for change:

[B]y introducing new evidence from the underside, by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored, a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion. (pp. 7-8)

I agree with Thompson when he contends that through juxtaposing spoken narratives with traditional historical testimonies, new insights can be rendered which may agitate the known, the authority, and the legitimacy of most documented her/his-stories.

Although seemingly a blessing in disguise to traditional narrations of history, oral history is not without limitations. Borrowing from JoAnn Pagano, Petra Munro (1998b) states, "[T]he discrepancies between what is told and what is experienced--are themselves theoretical constructs" (p. 267). In other words, regardless of the method of retrieving yesterday's tales, "[h]istory is always fictional" (p. 267). I contend that history's bridge between fact and fiction is innate. Because a narrative's meaning hinges on a temporal moment and one's selective choice in what and how an experience will be remembered, I hold that the re-telling of a historical event is a process of mytholization.<sup>49</sup> For as one solicits the will to remember, one can likewise elicit the desire to forget. Paul Ricour asserts that narratives reshape events in forms that never existed: "Because events and selves are reconstructions, original purity of experience can never be achieved" (as quoted in Munro, 1998b, p. 266). However, Alessandro Portelli (1991) argues that the original purity of the story or "fact(s)" is insignificant because facts do not disclose meanings made of an event. Rather, he maintains that in the myths that people choose to tell or those elements of the past which narrators

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<sup>49</sup>By mytholization, I am referring to the re-construction or remembering of an event based on one's needs, interests, and desires.

deliberately choose to forget, oral historians attain deeper insights into the meaning of an episode made by an orator. Specifically, Portelli contends that "errors, inventions, and myths lead [oral historians] through and beyond facts to their meaning" (p. 2).

### **Oral History as Pedagogy**

During the 1970's, oral history as pedagogy was first employed by a high school English teacher named Elliot Wigginton. Today, his approach is more commonly referred to as the *Faxfire* Approach. The *Faxfire* Approach draws on oral history, community studies, and theories of experientially-based pedagogy. Wigginton used *Faxfire* to connect the lives of his alienated Appalachian students to the learning objectives found in the school district's high school English curriculum (Wigginton, 1985). *Faxfire* was among the first to employ oral history as a pedagogical approach with secondary students.

Today there are countless projects across the nation.<sup>50</sup> In Mooresville, Indiana, juniors from Mooresville High School documented the trepidations of community members who endured the Great Depression. Their project, entitled We Made Do used oral historical accounts voiced by community members who resided in the Mooresville Senior Citizen Center (Adams, 1998). In Rhode Island, ninth grade students enrolled in the Honors English Program at South Kingstown High School engaged in an oral history project focusing on Rhode Island women during World War II. Their project,

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<sup>50</sup> See The Oral History Review (1998), 25, 1-2.



entitled What Did You Do In The War Grandma?, gave vivid accounts of the roles, beliefs, and attitudes of Rhode Island women who were first and second party participants in World War II (Woods, 1997). In Rocky Gap, Virginia, students from Rocky Gap High School retrieved oral accounts about Appalachian culture and maintained and preserved these accounts at The Bland County History Archives. The purpose of the archive was to secure stories of the people of Bland County and share them with the public in a variety of ways. Many of the stories are epics of the last people to have been born and raised in a real log cabin while living in a hollow or on top of a mountain (Students of Rocky Gap High School, 1999). In Holmes County, Mississippi, eighth and ninth graders enrolled in a summer education program sponsored by the Rural Organization and Cultural Center (ROCC). In this program, students participated in an oral history project documenting their local community's grass roots involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Specifically, this project sought to encourage pride in an impoverished community and to develop youth leadership among its participants (MacLeod, 1991).

During the summer of 1998, I directed an urban summer youth project. This project, sponsored by the Job Training Partnership Program, used oral history and community studies to implement a community uplift plan. The purpose of the project was to historicize the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott movement that served as the blueprint for the 1956 Montgomery bus boycott movement. I became amazed as I witnessed local urban African American

high school students from South Baton Rouge, Louisiana, interview participants of the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott movement, transcribe their interviews, and transform this data into their own cultural magazine entitled The Baton Rouge Bus Boycott of 1953 (McKinley High School Oral History Project, Summer 1998). In addition to the magazine, students also used their transcriptions to create a reader's theater presentation entitled Rollin' Through History: A Tribute to the Memory of the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott. My experience with this group of young people led to my desire to implement an oral history project in an urban public high school to see in what ways oral history might inspire real education.

### **Teacher/Learner: Engaging the Field**

In an effort to more fully understand students'/historians'<sup>51</sup> experience with oral history as real education, I felt the need to teach this approach in an urban public classroom cultural context.<sup>52</sup> According to Goodenough (as cited in Patton, 1980/1990), the idea of culture is critical to qualitative research. The quintessential assumption in qualitative investigation is that every human group that is together for a period of time will evolve a culture. Accordingly, Goodenough defines culture as a "collection of behavior patterns and beliefs that constitute standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can

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<sup>51</sup> In our classroom environment, because learners, in my view, were more than students but were also historians, active agents in w/righting history, I will henceforth refer to participants in this study as students/historians.

<sup>52</sup> Patton (1980/1990) refers to framing qualitative studies in which the researcher is also the participant as participant observer.

be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it " (p. 68). Because of these very influential factors, I realized that understanding oral history as real education depended largely on the formation of our classroom's culture (Dobberty, 1982). Hence, through learning and teaching daily with students/historians, I surmised that I would be better able to witness embedded factors which would evolve in a classroom culture using experientially based pedagogy.

### **Entering the Field**

At the end of the 1998 spring semester, Dr. Munro, my current major professor, asked me to direct the McKinley High School summer oral history project. The project was sponsored by Job Training Partnership of America (JTPA) and Louisiana State University's Community University Project (CUP). Needing to gain entry into a public school for the next academic year, I viewed my acceptance of the position as that opportunity. Once the summer oral history project started, I approached Almenia Williams, principal of McKinley High School, to see if she would be interested in allowing me to develop an oral history project and document its use with students. Because the summer oral history project had been housed at McKinley for three summers, Ms. Williams was very familiar with oral history as a pedagogical process and, thus, very receptive to the idea. Also, as former director of the African American Cultural Center at Louisiana State University through its community programming, I knew McKinley needed an African American history instructor.

With these insights, I negotiated with Ms. Williams. I told her that I would be willing to teach her African American Studies course at no cost during the 1998-1999 academic year, if she would be willing to cover expenses for the project. Amazed and excited, Ms. Williams accepted my offer, and I was happy to know that I had secured a site for my study.

After speaking with Ms. Williams, I decided that students/historians would be whoever was interested in taking "African American Studies." In addition, I thought that by teaching "African American Studies" I would be able to have a classroom filled with African American learners without requesting a racially homogenous group in a public school setting.<sup>53</sup> My suspicion was correct. When I met students/historians at the door on August 24, 1998, each and every person that entered the class was African American.

Our first week together was an ice breaker. During this time, I discussed the class syllabus (see appendix C) and shared with students/historians the contract agreement (see appendix A) that bound us together for an entire year. In our contract, students/historians agreed that they understood the rules and regulations for our course and gave their consents to following those rules and regulations. However, students/historians were not the only ones required to sign a contract. In order for students/historians to remain in this class, their parents or legal guardians were also responsible for signing a contract. This was in addition to parents

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<sup>53</sup> In order for me to have obtained a racially homogenous group of students, I would have had to go through a lot of bureaucratic red tape for, in these de facto segregated moments, a deliberate racially homogenous group in a public school setting is illegal.

giving their children permission to participate in the study. The parental contract was standard informing parents about the requirements of our course and expectations for students/historians. Additionally, students'/historians' parents and guardians were asked to sign a "Participation to Consent" form, giving parental permission to allow each student/ historian to participate in this study. Since I was not studying students but, rather, performing an educative process, it was not necessary to have students sign a "Protection of Human Subjects" form. Instead, I filed a request for an IRB to waive consent with Dr. Munro.

During this first week, in addition to our contract preliminaries, students were assigned to read an African American folktale entitled "The Story of the Eagle."<sup>54</sup> In this fable, a mother eagle is captured by a chicken farmer. The farmer traps the eagle so that he can place her in a cage and charge a fee to those who want to see her. However, the mother eagle is accustomed to freedom. Each time the farmer attempts to remove the eagle from her trap, the eagle bites and claws him. Finally, the farmer becomes so angry that he grabs his rifle and kills her. Sadly, the mother eagle leaves behind two eggs. Noticing the eggs, the farmer places them under a setting hen, hoping that when the eggs hatch, the eaglets will think they are chickens and not fight for their freedom. The first eaglet egg to hatch from its shell is Tom. Not knowing he is an eagle, Tom is very happy thinking that he is a chicken. However, one day Tom notices his reflection in a stream of water. When Tom sees that he is

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<sup>54</sup>See Robinson, E. (1989),pp. 92-96/

not white like the chickens and that his feathers do not lay flat on his head, he becomes ashamed of his color and his head. He takes some porcellana and rubs it all over his feathers to lighten them, and he gets some gheri curl to put on his head feathers to smooth them. Soon Tom feels happy that he is beginning to look more like the other chickens. By and by, the other eaglet egg hatches from its shell. The eaglet's name is Turk. Unlike his brother, Tom, Turk likes his color and the feathers on his head just as the way they are. But, because he likes his physical appearance, Turk is ostracized by his brother and the barn yard chickens. In his loneliness, the only joy this little eagle has is looking up at the sky. One day Turk spots a speck in the sky that becomes larger and larger. It is an eagle, the largest bird he has ever seen. The eagle perches on a branch and asks Turk to fly up. Turk flies high up on the branch and the eagle tells Turk his history. He tells Turk that he, too, is an eagle and that his mother and his father ruled the skies as kings and queens like Turk, and other eagles.

Teasing out the inferences of this tale and ways that it might apply to African American people today, students/ historians and I discussed this reading. I had decided to use this particular folk tale because, for me, the fable was a wonderful illustration of the utility of oral history as real education.

The following week students/historians constructed and completed their "My Story" collages. In my view, "My Story" collages are a very important activity. Through these collages, students/historians document their lives with pictorial representations and literary poetry. In documenting their lives, the

activity becomes an instructional exercise on making history. Through the “My Story” activity, I shared with students how easily history is made immortal through documentation. For me, this activity is rich in breaking down many preconceived assumptions of what constitutes history and who are, or can be, historians.

By September 1, 1998, students/historians began to discuss what would become the foci of their oral history project. A couple of suggestions were made; among these was interviewing drug dealers in their community. Although I thought this was an exceptional idea, I also knew that I needed to get the principal's approval. Unlike me, Ms. Williams was not enthused about having drug traffickers on her campus or her students affiliating with them. After I shared with students/historians Ms. Williams' disapproval, they then decided to study African American music. Students/historians followed a very democratic decision-making process to decide on their topic. They shouted out various topics and I wrote them on the board. After about eight different topics were listed, students/historians voted by a show of hands which topic they would study. Initially, students/historians only wanted to study rap music. However, I was able to persuade them to investigate music as a sort of historical continuum. I shared with students/historians that music is more than beats and measures, that in the lyrics of music are messages that could and would reveal various aspects of African Americans' experiences in the United States. Students/historians, upon my suggestion, began their trace with the music forms of ancient West Africa, followed by spirituals, blues, jazz, rhythm

and blues, and rap. I suggested these particular music genres because they originated in particular periods in African American history.<sup>55</sup> After establishing which genre of music would constitute the focus of their research, each student/historian selected a partner.

In partnered teams, students/historians chose a particular musical expression which would concentrate their individual contribution to their collective project. Each team was responsible for developing one section in their final magazine publication. Though we started in August with eight students/historians, by the first week of September, enrollment had increased to twelve. However, by September 6, two members dropped the class claiming that there was simply "too much ah work" involved in our class. Because these students/historians had been responsible for the rhythm and blues section in their final magazine, this portion was omitted from the final text. Thus, the McKinley High School oral history project had five teams responsible for contributing five sections: musical forms of ancient West Africa, spirituals, blues, jazz, and rap.

Students'/historians' first activity for their research project, took place on September 4, 1998. For two weeks, students/historians and I went to the library to research and surfed the 'Net to find out as much information as possible about their chosen genre. Students/historians were also asked to schedule interviews with prospective interviewees. At the start of each new

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<sup>55</sup> See African American Review, 29,( 2), Summer 1995, especially Salaam (1995) "It Didn't Jes Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music," pp.351-375.



class period, I asked students/historians to share with me the contact information of those persons whom they had selected to interview. When after two weeks no one had made any contacts, I began to panic. I decided to schedule participant interviews and develop interview questions for students/historians. I contacted renowned jazz clarinetist Alvin Batiste, blue guitarist Tabby Thomas, and professor Joyce Jackson of Louisiana State University, whose primary research interest is African American music. All consented to have students/historians interview them. Alvin Batiste during his interview gave students/historians a private jazz session, and Tabby Thomas performed an entire concert, in addition to sharing his oral history on the blues with students/historians.

However, Tabby Thomas' concert and students'/historians' reaction to interviewing Dr. Jackson made me realize that I had made a big mistake. Though they enjoyed Batiste's interview/performance immensely, very few students/ historians showed up for Tabby Thomas's concert. And those who were assigned to interview Dr. Jackson did not show up at all.

Although I was very upset, I did not reprimand students/historians. Instead, I saw this episode as an opportunity to reflect and learn yet another lesson from my teacher/learners. My action of selecting their interviewees and dictating their questions for them was a message that I disregarded students'/ historians' agency in choosing knowing for themselves. Students'/historians' response was their absence. I realized that their absence was students'/ historians' way of informing me that I had disempowered them to name

knowing for themselves. In other words, in telling students/historians whom they should study and what they should know, I also told them whose knowledge was worth knowing and whose experiences counted as worthy of consideration in studying African American music. Thus, in response to my more authoritative stance, students/historians responded with passive defiance. I say "passive" because students/historians did not rant and rave about my choosing their interviewees or defining their questions. Instead, they simply did not show up. Consequently, I apologized to them and gave them back their project. By this I mean, they became responsible for selecting their interviewees, creating their interview questions, conducting their interviews, transcribing this data, and editing their materials. After completing their library and Internet research, each group shared their findings. Through this information, students/historians collectively created generic interview questions (see appendix D). After constructing their questions, students/historians used these questions to practice interviewing techniques with one another prior to engaging in further interviews.

My role throughout these activities became that of mentor. I offered suggestions when students asked for assistance and I served as chief editor of their editing process. Additionally, because, like many urban school settings, absenteeism is relatively high, I also required students to assume collective responsibility for one another. In other words, if someone was not present, then someone else was responsible for the absent person's

assignment.<sup>56</sup> Many times I emphasized that no one was finished until the book was finished. Though several grumbled initially about this class requirement, all seemed to appreciate this mandate by the end of our class experience.

Along with their oral history assignment, students/historians were also required to read, grapple with, and journal daily about their understanding of Carter G. Woodson's (1933/1990/1998a) The Mis-Education of the Negro. They also viewed, problematized, and wrote journal responses for the following films: Lady Sings the Blues: The Autobiography of Billy Holiday, The Cotton Club, Sankofa, and Amistad. Through these assignments, along with their interview notes, I deliberately attempted to connect the past to the present. After each activity, I asked students/historians to explain in what ways, if any, these stories reveal generic themes regarding being black in America today. The purpose of these additional materials was to generate consciousness-raising activities through problem-posing techniques.<sup>57</sup> Paulo Freire (1970/1997) maintains that problem-posing education is a process in which. . .

people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (p. 64)

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<sup>56</sup>By this I mean if someone was not present, then whoever was available was responsible for picking up where that person left off and continuing with the assignment of getting the book done.

<sup>57</sup>See Beverly Gordon (1993) and Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998).

Hence, my outlook for this project was twofold. One, I wanted to investigate the utility of oral history as real education with urban African American learners. Two, I wanted students to develop a critical consciousness of their own.<sup>58</sup>

Because our class period met for only fifty minutes daily and for twenty minutes every third Wednesday of the month, completing their book took longer than what I had initially intended (see appendix C). I had hoped, since I had agreed to work for an entire school year as their classroom teacher, that students/historians would have been able to complete two projects by the end of the school year. But, due to time constraints, this was not possible. Students/historians did not finish their text until mid-February, and they still were responsible for sharing their findings with the community that made their study possible, another requirement for participating in the course. In three weeks, students/historians developed a cover for their magazine and asked a fellow schoolmate, known for his artistic talents, to reproduce their creation. Additionally, they prepared their presentation and met with the school's print shop teacher to see if his class would be willing to reproduce their magazine and presentation program.

Once the printshop teacher agreed, students/historians started preparing for their final presentation. Although I shared with them various

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<sup>58</sup> My reader may be wondering if oral history could have served as real education without my additions. My reply is yes, if oral history is couched in questioning and problem-posing. I argue in chapter eight, however, that often oral history is not realized or utilized in this way and therefore, in my view, relinquishes its possibilities in inciting real education.

video footage of ways students had previously chosen to engage in their final presentation, students/historians decided that each group would share information they had learned through their research. They also invited Kwaku Agyeman'yeboah, Francis Williams and Frank Williams, Shane Bennett and Cornell Moore, their interviewees, to perform as a part of their final presentation. While helping to prepare for their presentation, one student/historian, Shafiiqa, created invitations at home on her word processor. After students/historians were satisfied with their presentation format and had received commitments from their invited performers, they sent invitations to those they had interviewed as well as members of McKinley's alumni association. In the weeks after completing the first draft of their magazine and prior to their presentation, students/historians made an intercom announcement to invite teachers and their peers at McKinley to their final presentation. On March, 30, 1999, students/historians hosted their presentation. In my view, it was a success. The library was filled with people and students/historians received a huge applause for their hard work and great efforts.

### **Collecting Data**

After their presentation, in April 1999, I began conducting interviews with students/ historians to capture on tape their experience with oral history as real education. Each class session became an interview session. I interviewed students/historians in the home economics kitchen while other students/ historians used our class time for study hall. I chose the home

economics kitchen because it was a nice cozy, informal space, equipped with stoves, refrigerators, and a little kitchen table where each student/historian sat with me and discussed his or her experience with oral history as real education.

From April, 1999, to May, 1999, I interviewed each student/historian at least twice. My first interview with students/historians consisted of standardized open-ended questions. Patton (1980/1990) explains that in a standardized open-ended interview, interview questions are written out in advance exactly the way they are to be asked during the interview. Patton argues:

[T]he basic purpose of the standardized open-ended interview is to minimize interviewer effects by asking the same question of each respondent. Moreover, the interview is systematic and the necessity for interviewer judgement during the interview is reduced. The standardized open ended interview also makes data analysis easier because it is possible to locate each respondent's answer to the same question rather quickly and to organize questions and answers that are similar. (p. 285)

Though I used standardized open-ended questions, I asked follow-up questions whenever students/historians made a comment about something I did not understand. Our second interview resembled what Patton (1980/1990) calls "informal conversational interview" (p. 280). An informal conversational interview is fashioned based on an initial interview. After transcribing the initial interview, I read each transcription to formulate clarifying questions. These questions set the mode of conversation for subsequent interviews.

To begin our specific conversation on their experience with oral history as real education, I asked students/historians to describe for me our class. Realizing that students/historians seemed to view class as different from our oral history project, I then rephrased the question and asked how would they describe our class project. For students/historians, class took place on Fridays when we read, problematized, and situated Woodson or the other materials we discussed. On the other hand, students/historians regarded our class project as the work they engaged in to produce their own text. In addition to interviewing and transcribing students'/historians' responses, other sources of data collected included my research journal as well as various audio and video footage of our classroom experiences together. Although I periodically videotaped and audio recorded our in class sessions, daily I journaled. I engaged in these activities and used them as sources of data to capture specific moments when students/historians were actively engaged in oral history as real education.

### **Researcher/Informer: Doing Data Analysis**

How do I tell their story without silencing their lives? How do I convey the truths of their experiences shadowed by my "lies"?<sup>59</sup> How do I wright the legend of ten urban African American learners' experience with oral history as real education? These were the questions I found myself perplexed with long after my tape recorder was turned off and my grade and roll book was handed

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<sup>59</sup> My use of the word "lies" refers to biases I believe are inherent in writers of history, qualitative research, or any discipline that seeks to retell experiences.

in to McKinley's administrative office. Answering my query, Kaz (1987)

discusses "Epoche," which, he holds, is the initial step in data analysis:

Epoche is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Epoche helps enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open view without prejudgement or imposing meaning too soon. This suspension in judgement is critical in phenomenological investigation and requires the setting aside of the researcher's personal viewpoint in order to see the experience for itself. (pp. 36-37)

In Epoche, researchers acknowledge their biases. Consequently, they use multiple means of analyzing data in an effort to curtail their biases from skewing their data analysis. For me personally, through Epoche I was able to recognize and respect what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) terms an "outsider-within" (p. 12) subjectivity. In this light, my marginal positionality as a black woman enabled my academic location to examine and analyze my data collection from a critical stance. Yet, Epoche did not allow my black woman academic subjectivities to ultimately conclude my data finding. Rather, through Epoche I was responsible for constantly questioning my findings as well as seeking multiple voices to aid me in interpreting my data. Yet analyzing data raised other issues in my quest to know how oral history inspires real education.

Initially, when I first began to deal with my data I was very overwhelmed. I had all this stuff--my interviews of students/historians, interviews conducted by students/historians, students'/historians' essay writing assignments, the magazine they published, a grade book, a syllabus,



my reflective journal, and in-class video and audio footage. I was so overwhelmed with “stuff” that it took me nearly two years to even gain the courage to begin looking at my data collection. Later, I found that many qualitative researchers, like me, are left numb by an overwhelming amount of data and that procrastination is common. Quoting Jim Hinojosa, Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, and McCormack (1991) maintain:

Upon leaving the field, I was confronted with the final interpretative aspect of my research pilot study. The challenge was handled with skillfully organized avoidance. I had the cleanest apartment in New York City, ironed shirts, several lists of “Things that needed to be done,” and even a balanced check book. Why the avoidance behavior? Why does it seem so difficult to complete something you have been doing? These are the questions that entered my mind as I attempted to avoid the task of data interpretation. (p. 141)

Through their findings, I learned that many qualitative researchers are frozen when faced with having to eat their data elephant.<sup>60</sup>

### **Eating the Elephant**

Finally, I realized that I could not run away from my mountain of data. Having successfully completed both my general qualifying exams and my prospectus, I had to face the data elephant<sup>61</sup> and eat away at it just a little bit at a time. My first bite came two years later after meeting with my major professor, Petra Munro, during the summer of 2000. As she had done many

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<sup>60</sup> By “eat” I am referring to engaging in data analysis.

<sup>61</sup> The term “data elephant” was created while reflecting on a conversation I once had with a dear friend named Charley Funk. Before coming to graduate school, Charlie forewarned me that the secret to succeeding and completing any of my goals was to look at them as if they were elephants and simply eat away at them one bite at a time.

times before, Dr. Munro asked if I had begun to “work with it.” Stated another way, Dr. Munro wanted to know if I had started to analyze my data and tackle the elephant looming in my office file cabinets. I knew that my graduate school clock was ticking and, despite all the horror stories that I had heard about analyzing data--the long hours categorizing informants’ experiences, and the possibly painstaking wrongful attempts of searching for and organizing themes--I felt that I had to start biting. At the very least, I would try to understand what students/historians expressed. But, there was one slight problem: I did not know where to begin. And, once I got started, what should I do next? As Dr. Munro and I walked to lunch one afternoon to discuss my dissertation plan, she suggested methods she had found useful in analyzing data. Since I am a hands-on person, I still felt as if I needed more information on how to interpret data. Later that week, I found myself once more telling Dr. Munro that I had not started because I did not know what to do, and she gave me several books to look over to get some ideas. In each, I searched the table of contents looking for any chapters that discussed analyzing data. Although Dr. Munro had told me many times that there is no one right way to interpret research, I felt that if I had someone to cite, at the very least, I had a crutch to stand on if for some reason my interpretations were viewed as wrong or overly laden with biases.

After reading several chapters on data analysis, I finally selected Maykut and Morehouse's (1994) “Using the Constant Comparative Method” in Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide. In their

work, Maykut and Morehouse employed "interpretative descriptive analysis" (p. 122). In interpretative descriptive analysis, researchers are "concerned with accurately describing what she or he has understood [by] reconstructing the data into a recognizable reality for the people who have participated in the study" (p. 122). The specific element that attracted me most about this procedure was its requirement for constant comparative method. Through a constant comparative approach, "skilled researchers . . . become adept at weaving descriptions, speaker's words, fieldnotes, quotations, and their own interpretations into a rich and believable descriptive narrative" ( p. 122). Hence, though theory seemed to undergrid the final outcome of the analysis, Maykut and Morehouse instructed me to create theory through multiple venues, field notes, interviews, and other related artifacts and use these sources to triangulate my findings. Thus, I checked each hypothesis, re-checked it, and then asked others to check my findings again before themes emerged to inform my theory.

### **A Comparative Approach**

Because I realized and learned through my study that it is very difficult for a qualitative researcher to remove herself or himself from their more authoritative posture while describing/defining a participant's experience, the constant comparative method was very important. For me, through a constant comparative method, I was able to understand and express more astutely how participants experienced oral history as real education as opposed to how I

felt they should have experienced the event. To accomplish this end, I used the constant comparative method.

Using the constant comparative method, my first task was to read through "all" my data and then re-read it "all" again in search of recurring words, phrases, and topics in the data. On a huge piece of butcher paper, I began writing down the recurring word, phrases, and topics: McKinley predominantly black an issue, our story is left out of the history book, school without walls, enhanced interpersonal relationships, meeting new people, it's different, I'd rather talk than read, disconnected materials, need for extra-curricular activities, speaking freely, Ebonics rules, freedom to speak, school is boring, taking school seriously, a cozy little class, feelings of accomplishment, the textbook is inadequate, real life history, talking, understanding their material world, working together, class involvement, students in control of learning, motivation, controlling a man's thinking, persistent racism, caring teachers push students, yesterday in today, student-centered, pride, inspired to work, cooperative responsibility, lessons told/lessons learned, not an easy class, learning untold history. I then shared my findings with Dr. Munro. After looking over these words, phrases and topics, we were able to collapse them into provisional categories, that is, generative themes to guide my analysis. The provisional categories were: On Voice, How Students/Historians Experience McKinley, How Students/Historians Experience Oral History, On History, Student Motivation,

## **How Students/Historians Experience School, Intimate Class Size, Woodson, Racism, and Teachers Who Care.**

**My next step was to “unitize” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 128) my data. Unitizing data is the process of identifying chunks or pieces of meaning in the data. Not simple babble, units of meaning are chunks of information able to stand alone. In Maykut and Morehouse's words, units of meaning must be “understandable without additional information except for knowledge of the researcher's focus inquiry” (p. 128). After glueing hundreds of units of meaning on 5x8 index cards, my next step in a constant comparative method was to compare each unit of meaning to each provisional category by interpreting my data through what Maykut and Morehouse calls a “look-like/feel like-test” (p.136). The look-like/feel-like test is simply reading through each unit of meaning and placing it in an appropriate provisional category based on the description and meaning of both the unit of meaning and the provisional category. I began by writing each of my provisional categories along the top of huge sheets of butcher paper. With the help of my peer supporter and “sistah”/ friend Tayari kwa Salaam, I placed each appropriate unit of meaning in what looked like and felt like the applicable provisional category.**

**Throughout data analysis, Ely et al. (1991) maintain that another important source of triangulation is a support group:**

**I have been in individual and/or group supervision consistently throughout my practice. It is here that one triangulates--checks feelings and perceptions, gets feedback and fresh perspectives. (p. 163)**

Tayari kwa Salaam and Dr. Petra Munro were primary members of my support group. At this stage, I asked Dr. Munro to meet with me in order to give me some guidance and input. After reviewing the provisional categories with their respective units of meaning, Dr. Munro asked me what they meant.

Specifically, she wanted to know: What were reoccurring themes and concerns? What were the themes that seemed to cross the boundaries of my provisional categories? How had students/historians informed me-- in what ways had their oral history project inspired real education? I told Dr. Munro that what I found students/historians commenting on most was how oral history allowed them to name and claim history for themselves, how traces of yesterday's memories enabled them to better understand their current situations, and how learning in context with curriculum reflective of their interests was important. Having established these final categories, my next task was to rearrange my units of meaning to see if I had enough data to substantiate my findings. Substantial support was revealed. I then had to write an analysis of my investigation to share with others what I had come to know. It was here, in this moment, that I found myself perplexed by another dilemma: naming.

Qualitative researchers who are committed to egalitarianism often find themselves faced with the complicating and contradicting dilemma of naming. For each time qualitative researchers name, define, and/or describe the experiences of another, they simultaneously author another's tale as well as

**their existence. In the next chapter, I specifically share my process of naming students/historians.**

## **Chapter 4**

### **Naming You, I Claim Myself**

A critical aspect in oral history is that it embodies simultaneously both an egalitarian as well as an authoritarian stance. Alessandro Portelli (1991) reminds future oral historians that oral history is not an opportunity for those who are historically marginalized to speak for themselves. Rather, in oral history, Portelli contends:

the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian. It is the historian who selects the people who will be interviewed; who contributes to the shaping of the testimony by asking the questions and reacting to the answers; and who gives the testimony its final published shape and context... . Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history, it is clear that the class does not speak in abstract, but speaks to the historian, with the historian and inasmuch as the material is published, through the historian. (p. 56)

Hence, historians are not mediators re-telling history but, rather, protagonists naming history. Consequently, in historicizing<sup>62</sup> oral accounts, sagas no

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<sup>62</sup>In traditional history his/her-stories are legitimized through documentation. Documentation is a process of comparing claims to a truth with official sources of the truth; i.e., court records, archives, and newspapers, in an attempt to objectify subjective claims to a truth. However, interestingly enough, these official sources are also subjective and are often instruments of institutions to re-present truth claims (Ricour, 1988p. 117). My use of the term "historicizing" does not refer to documenting history but, rather, writing/righting a trace. Ricour (1988) writes that "If archives can be said to be instituted, and their documents are collected and conserved, this is on the basis of the presupposition that the past has left a trace, which has become the monuments and documents that bear witness to the past" (p. 119). Further, he states that a "trace as visible to everyone, even if it can only be deciphered by a few, projects our preoccupation, as illustrated by our hunt, search, or inquiry, into public time which makes our private durations commensurate with one another" (p. 124) What I believe Ricour is suggesting is that it is the trace, untarnished by the biases of legitimacy, that provides a site for writing/righting history.



longer belong exclusively to the narrator. Writing creates a fusion between the narrator and the historian. Portelli (1991) writes "oral history does not begin with one abstract person observing another reified one, but with two persons meeting on a ground of equality to bring together their different types of knowledge and achieve a new synthesis from which both will be changed" (p. xii). By writing or naming the story, both the narrator and the historian are altered. The narrator's tale provides the oral historian with new insights but the historian now governs the naming of the saga. As the oral historian re-tells the epic of the narrator, pieces of the historian's story are etched with every stroke of his or her pen. Hence, Portelli maintains, "Instead of discovering sources, oral historians partly create them. Far from becoming mere mouthpieces for the working class, oral historians may be using other people's words, but are still responsible for the overall discourse" (p. 56). Yet, in spite of oral history's seemingly more authoritative<sup>63</sup> end, the oral historian is still responsible to the informant and her/his story. Responsibility is often masked by traditional writers of history who, as "omniscient narrators,"<sup>64</sup> render accounts in the third person "dominating entirely and from above the consciousness of the participants themselves" (Portelli, 1991, p. 57). However, as an oral historian names an epic, she is bound to accountability.

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<sup>63</sup> Along with Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991), I contend that in a literate culture, the power of the pen creates this dichotomous relationship between the scribe and her/his subject. In such cultures, the author-researcher becomes the official knower of experience. In my view, this relationship between the researcher and the subject reflects authoritarianism and domination.

<sup>64</sup> "Omniscient narrator" is a phrase borrowed from literary studies by Portelli (1991). He uses this phrase to describe the presumed opaque personalities of traditional historians.

Her accountability necessitates that she as an oral historian unmask historiography as an autonomous act of story telling empowering both the narrator as knower and the historian as translator influencing the naming of history. Sharing my naming/birthing process of students/historians, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is entitled "Subject to Signification." In this section, I discuss the complicated paradox I experienced while naming students/historians. In section two, entitled Naming You/ Claiming Me," I more vividly discuss students'/historians' naming through our "My Stories."

### **Subject to Signification**

*In 1969, I was born. This was a period of heightened black consciousness and black pride. My parents were proud working middle-class African Americans. They taught me to love being black and placed me in environments with other black folk who likewise loved their blackness. Even to this day, I rely on this love for my black skin to sustain me through racist attacks on my body as I attempt to navigate the terrains of a white supremacist society (hooks, 1992; Tatum, 1997). As a preschooler, my parents sent me to a nursery school called Greater Christ Temple. There I was not taught how to read or write or to be Christ like--obedient and subservient. Rather, in nursery school, I learned black history and to love as well as revere black people. Before I knew  $1 + 1 = 2$ , I could tell my parents who was Malcolm X, Barbara Jordan, Marion Anderson, Booker T. Washington, and a host of other great African Americans. And,*

*because each morning we recited "Together we stand; divided we fall," I knew at an early age that there was strength in numbers and abiding security in black unity.*

My awareness of African American achievements along with my love for my black self are all elements in my life that have produced who I am. However, as an adult budding intellectual, I have come to realize that the love for my race and for all who share my raciality are not the only markers that color my perceptions of the world and influence how I name myself and others. Therefore, for the purpose of this project, how I birthed students/historians also have reflected my experiences and how I have come to know.

In addition to being black, I am also female, college educated, a wife, and a mother; I consider myself working middle-class, a womanist, a socialist, a democrat, and a Christian.<sup>65</sup> Because I am a multiplicity of subjects, like a muddled medley, my perceptions are skewed by splinters of my subjectivities and my embodied truth(s). As fractured realities, my multiple voices make possible naming for/of myself and others. But this naming, a fluid complex undertaking, is fraught with confusion and conflict. For as my being(s) signifies, it is met with the signification of another. My others' naming, likewise cloaked by their "nonsynchronous identities,"<sup>66</sup> coincide and collude with my

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<sup>65</sup> This complicated hybridity of subjectivities is what Cameron McCarthy (1990) refers to as "nonsynchronous identities" (pp. 71-96).

<sup>66</sup> Once more, see Cameron McCarthy (1990).

attempt to name, to define. Only the trickster of the signifier knows when allegiance or dissension will prevail (Gates, 1988).<sup>67</sup> Hence, my naming of students/historians may or may not be how they or others would choose to name or signify them. At the very least, their names are mere reflections of who I am.<sup>68</sup>

Nonetheless, in a long painstaking process, I named the students/historians of the 1998-1999 McKinley High School oral history project. Ironically, had I not been two years removed from participants or known where to locate them, I would have asked them to name themselves. Yet, as qualitative researcher<sup>69</sup> and dissertation writer, as I described what I

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<sup>67</sup> For example, just as I name a person, place, or thing, so too are people, places, and things named by others. Because I believe that a large part of naming is nestled in one's experience and thus expressed autobiographically, rooted in a very subjective existence, who we name, what we name, and how we name it, for both me and another, may be similar or completely different.

<sup>68</sup> Naming is discursively, communally, and autobiographically negotiated and thus, created. In David Sibley's (1995) text Geography of Exclusion, he maintains that naming is inextricably linked to abjection. Through abjection, an emergent identity begins to take form, growing within, and because of its communal life with its other. As a discursive practice, naming is given meaning through a relationship between the signifies and the signified. "Signs define one another neutrally by means of their difference from one another. [Thus, the signified is named by means of] dualism or binary opposites" (Saussure in Pinar et al, 1995:458). Hence, name is formed by concluding difference and thus prescribing meaning. *You are that which I am not*. As communal practice, I assert that naming is shared performance of experience and context. Names then derive meaning not as a dichotomy but in symmetry *You are because I am*. And as autobiography, as I attempt to name through either /or's or both/ and's, the way I come to know a name's meaning is in its relationship to myself.

<sup>69</sup> In The Handbook of Qualitative Research, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) explain that qualitative research "involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials...that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p.3)

had come to know about oral history as a pedagogy as real education, I still would have found myself defining who they were. Hence, in this research project, I equate my role as a qualitative researcher with the role of a mother giving birth to her child. I believe that as I wrote students'/historians' experiences, I simultaneously gave birth to them. And, like Jamila<sup>70</sup> passing through my birth canal, they too passed through my intellectual birthing channel, as I wrote our project into existence.

As stated previously, naming students/historians was quite a self-defining process. As I named each student/historian, I likewise identified myself. Like an unborn child who draws from its mother in order to physically exist, in naming students/historians so, too, were their constructions drawn from elements of who I am. So, as you read their naming, you are also reading various subjects of my own labels: *Dhambizoa* (The Sins Are Theirs), *Akua* (Sweet Messenger), *Bashira* (Predictor Of Good News), *Daraja* (Bridge), *Osyinwese* (God Made Me All Right), *Shafiiqa* ( Kind-Hearted), *Assata* (Warlike), *Nini* (Industrious) *Bayyina* (Evidence or Proof), and *Butu* (Weary).

Since the naming of a child first begins the establishment of its identity (Osuntoki, 1977/1991), this endeavor was undertaken with love, fear, and excitement. When I began searching for names, I wanted to find expressions that would most adequately define who students/historians were. At the same

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<sup>70</sup> At eighteen months, Jamila Breon Brandon is the most beautiful toddler, as her name suggests, and my first-born child.

time, since I acknowledge students/ historians as descendants of a people who were deliberately erased from their history, I also wanted their names to denote place and define origin.<sup>71</sup>

Several historians claim that the majority of enslaved Africans were taken from the coast of West Africa. Along the coast of West Africa lived many ethnic groups, each possessing its own distinct language and customs of behavior. These included Fulani, Ebo, Yoruba, and a host of others. Other scholars contend that Africans were taken from all over the continent of Africa, so to name one distinct region is a misnomer. With this in mind, I have chosen two sets of origin to represent the naming of students/historians, Yoruba and Kiswahili. Yoruba was selected because it is one of the many groups located in West Africa and because of the wealth of documentation that supports that thousands of Africans were extracted from this region of Africa. Kiswahili, on the other hand, located in East Africa, was chosen because, in my view, the meaning of several of these names well suit various students/ historians.

Among the Kiswahili names chosen are *Daraja* (Bridge), *Bashira* (Predictor of

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<sup>71</sup>In conversation with one of my peer editors, she pointed out to me that slave makers "attempted" to erase African Americans from our history. She maintained that their unsuccessful attempt was evident through various Africanisms retained in African American culture, i.e., quilting, jazz, gumbo, etc. Although, I do agree with her that within our culture are elements of Africanisms, my query, is to whom do they belong? From an essentialist and, in my view, racist perspective, these retentions belong to all black people. Because Africa is the dark continent and I am black, then all that is Africa is mine? This way of thinking ignores that Africa is a continent made up of many countries and composed of millions of people who have various customs, beliefs, and life styles. As I am holding out in this section, because we were deliberately stripped from knowing--to whom do we belong-- many African Americans are turning to an essentialist view of Africa as a site to name our origin. Yet, in reality, this claim romanticizes a nation constructed through racism that simply does not exist.

Good News), *Dhambizoa* (The Sins Are Theirs), *Shafiiqa* (Kindhearted) and *Bayyina* (Evidence or Proof). Yoruba names selected are *Osyimwese* (God Created Me All Right), *Akua* (Sweet Messenger), *Butu* (Weary), *Nini* (Industrious) , and *Assata* (Warlike).

### **Naming You/Claiming Me**

*August 30, 1998*

*One of the highlights of my teaching responsibilities is decorating my classroom. I've always enjoyed using my bulletin boards to tease students' interests. My hope is that my bulletin board will provoke students to probe and ask questions in order to satisfy their newly aroused curiosity(ies). This year the foci of my bulletin board will be Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X and the colors of Pan-Africa (Stein, 1986). Yep, on red bulletin board paper I've placed King's and Malcolm's images.<sup>72</sup> Against this red backdrop, I trimmed their faces in black and green border. Oh, I can't wait for*

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<sup>72</sup> You may notice that I had no women on my bulletin boards. This is a prime example of what happens when one's education is inundated primarily with male figures, though not necessarily white males--males nonetheless. As a teacher, one often teaches what she or he knows. Though I knew of powerful black women, except for those learned in nursery school, they were not often included in my academic training. However, men like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. were part of my schooling. And, between the two, King was more easily accessible to me than X. Yet, because they were who I "knew," it was they I intended to teach. For me, this is an example of how powerful knowledge maintains existing social beliefs. Not knowing, or rather not remembering, great powerful and political figures as African American women reifies male dominance in the construction of knowing. Hence, students, particularly African American girls, come to believe that there are no great, powerful, and political African American women. In addition to this schooling, various forms of the media project meek, quiet docile images of African American women. More often than not, African American girls come to imitate these images. Perhaps, this will be the subject of my next book.

*students to ask me about those colors. I can tell them that black represents the color of our skins, red represents the blood that was shed during the Maafa, and green represents the land that was stolen from our people through colonialization. Shoot, that one question alone could stimulate a year's worth of discussion, especially if I break it down that the Maafa was the Black Holocaust. And, tell them that the Black Holocaust represents our fore-parents' horrific voyage across the Atlantic Ocean as well as their four hundred years of enslavement. And, that colonialization is a system through which many European nations went to foreign lands, like Africa, with guns and forced their authority over indigenous people. And, when they ask me about King or X, I can tell them that those two exemplify what it means to be Black in America today. Now, I bet that will turn on some light bulbs.*

*You know, without my decorative/informative bulletin board, my classroom is really attractive. It is not quite as provocative but it's definitely beautiful. My room is located on the second floor of the C building. It has several beautiful windows that overlook a magnificently manicured courtyard where students leisurely convene during lunch and study hall. In this room, I have two metal storage cabinets which will be good for storing tape recorders and important documents. And, I have one large metal shelf with a class set of bright yellow African American studies books trimmed in Kente cloth. My teacher's desk looks brand new and it is situated between the two doors of*



*our classroom, the two bulletin boards in our class, and one of two huge chalkboards. The other chalkboard faces the students' desks. Both the chalkboard and the students' desks, like my own, look brand new. Eight six-foot elongated tables with black Formica tops and light cherry wooden legs serve as students' desks. Although they are absolutely gorgeous, they are bolted to the floor. Consequently, these cemented desks are very problematic for me. They make the entire room feel stiff and rigid. I feel that in this space I am supposed to effuse some knowledge, and Freire (1970/1997) warned me last year that spewing knowledge epitomizes oppressor/oppressed relationships. So, I've got to get out of this beautiful room.*

*September 1, 1998*

*I spoke with an art teacher today . He has agreed to allow us to use his art room during third hour. This is the time that our class convenes. His class is not nearly as pretty nor as tidy as our previous classroom. The windows overlook the rear of the courtyard and the custodial parking lot. Paint, which may have been once pale yellow, is now chipped and beige. The teacher's desk is so raggedy that whenever I open the drawer it barely hangs on its hinges. The students' desks, though they are elongated tables, do not have black Formica tops, but some kind of cheap white surface, and the legs of the tables, like the tops, are etched with "Johnny loves Kay." However, the room*

*is huge. The desks are mobile. And, the atmosphere for some reason seems comfortable and cozy. Yep, this is where we need to be. In here, I can teach African American studies oral history style.*

A raggedy art classroom, located on the margins of McKinley's ethos, provided the context of our naming/claiming process. With images of their "My Story" collages decorating our learning space, together we explored oral history as real education and named who we are. On the front of each "My Story" collage were magazine clippings indicating who students/historians were, where they have been, and what they each aspired to become. On the back of their collages was a statement or poem used to articulate the meaning of the pictures chosen to represent their images. Here in this environment students/historians claimed themselves and I, like a mother anxiously waiting the birth of her child, pondered and contemplated their naming. Slowly but surely, their *beings* passed through my cognitive birthing channel and they were born. Listen closely as we each share "My Stor(ies)."

### ***Dhambizoa (The Sins Are Theirs)***

I am the eldest of four children. I am an eighteen-year-old graduating senior expecting the birth of my first child in May 1999. My mother is my mentor. I look up to her because she is smart, wise, and a single parent. I consider myself an average student. You know, not too smart but not dumb either. I get by. I'm smart in chemistry but not too smart in English. I don't like writing term papers and stuff. One thing that I would want a teacher to know about me is that I try. Sometimes I might act like I don't want to work, but I will do my work. And, when I'm struggling, I need you to help me. I hope to one day attend Southern University and major in nursing. For the most part, I am a typical teenager. I

enjoy talking on the phone, watching T.V. and being in the mall, looking but not buying since I don't have no money.

Dhambizoa was an extremely intelligent young African American woman.

She was light caramel brown with medium-short auburn colored hair and a smile that radiates any gloomy day, when she was willing to share it.

Dhambizoa was a quiet, timid, yet thoughtful young woman. Her thoughts were most often consumed with the racism that permeates United States culture. Sharing her beliefs about black and white relationships in America,

Dhambizoa talked about the way white people look at black people:

Like the way we look at ants on a piece of bread. That's how whites see blacks. You know those are ants; we don't want to share our bread with the ants. And, we don't want to have to eat the crust either. Some people don't like the crust. And, that's like the way society sees us [black people] like the crust of a slice of bread or ants. They really don't want the blacks. They just think the white is the whole.

Dhambizoa likens blacks to ants and the crust of bread while she equates whites as the decision makers for determining if their bread will be shared with the ants or their crust eaten or thrown away. In doing so, she asserts a hierarchical power relationship between whites and blacks. She declares that, in a racist society, whites have the authority to decide the fate of blacks. For, when you don't want ants on your bread--what do you do? You either throw them away or kill them. And, when you don't want the crust of slice a of bread, you remove it and likewise cast it away. Derrick Bell (1992), in Faces at the Bottom of the Well, vividly discusses the role of throwaway blacks in our United States culture. He argues that, by covert forms of racism, many white

Americans are able to legitimate throwing away blacks through social, economic, and political disenfranchisement and thus, to establish a permanent underclass. Yet, the sins that make racism possible are not Dhambizoa's but theirs, those who encourage, foster, and promote institutionalized racial oppression.<sup>73</sup> Because racism consumed so much of Dhambizoa's thinking, I found it fitting to name her as a reminder-- the sins are theirs. Consequently, this peaceful, demure, and intelligent young woman bore the name Dhambizoa.

**Akua (Sweet Messenger)**

Hello, I'm seventeen years old. I am the sibling of one brother who is a junior at Southern University majoring in civil engineering. My father holds a master's degree and is an assistant principal at a local middle school here in Baton Rouge. My mother is a preschool teacher. Because my mother and I have so much in common, being girls and all, it is her that I look to most for guidance. I hope to one day be a successful interior decorator. I enjoy playing with colors, matching things up, and making a home look beautiful. I also enjoy shopping and listening to music. My favorite subject is English. Things a teacher should know about me is that I am straightforward, articulate, kind, and hardworking.

Akua was a plump, chocolate brown young woman with short dark brown hair. Although debating seemed to excite Akua, her voice never rose above a whisper. And, when Akua spoke, her words were not frivolous retorts but profound, sweet messages for self-actualization.

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<sup>73</sup> For a more definitive account of the instruments that make racism possible, please reference Beverly Tatum (1997) Why do all the Black Kids Sit Together in the Cafeteria.

In a conversation on The Mis-Education of the Negro, by Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a), Akua shared with her classmates and me that the most interesting thing she learned from reading the book was:

If you can control a man's action and the way he thinks, then you can enslave his mind. You lead him to believe that he has to think a certain way in order to survive. When really it's up to him. He's in charge of his own destiny. He has the power to determine what he wants to become. It's not up to the next man to tell him what he needs to do.

This call for self-direction, for Akua, was also her measure for success. She held:

To succeed in life doesn't mean that you necessarily have the best education in the world but you have to be able to survive [and] try to live your life the way you want to and not the way other people want you to because everybody has their own life and they have to live it. Other people can't live it for you.

With shrewd insight, Akua articulated the necessity for success to be self-determined, if success is to be achieved. For her, looking to someone else to define who you are is a form of bondage. Throughout the project, Akua's words were often laden with instructions and sweet messages. Consequently, she was born *Akua*, Sweet Messenger.

### ***Bashira (Predictor of Good News)***

I am a graduating senior and the eldest of two sisters. In the ninth grade I lettered in volleyball. I also play basketball and have played for McKinley for three years. In addition to playing sports I also enjoy reading Terry McMillan novels, spending time with my mamma, talking on the telephone and being with my boyfriend. My mother is my mentor. she keeps things real for me. She lets me know straight up what's gonna be there and what's not gonna be there for me

when I'm grown and out on my own. After I graduate, I want to become a Marine, marry, have two kids.

Although I am a procrastinator when it comes to school work, when I put my mind to something, I get it done. I hope to one day be a successful person in my community and see my name and picture on a wall so that my kids can see me and I'll be like 'baby that's your mamma right there'!

Bashira, with skin the color of brown sugar and medium length dark brown hair, stood five feet and eight inches tall. Her physical stature allowed her to play her favorite sport, basketball, very skillfully. An optimist, Bashira flinched during conversations that seemed to promote negative energy. In a discussion on racism and people being "more into the 90's," Bashira had this to say:

I see the '90's as everybody getting along and putting all those racial slurs and racist stuff in the past. That's for the people that lived during that time. They lived it. We need to just leave that past behind you and just carry on into the future a world without all that racist stuff.

Though speaking in 1999, Bashira was talking about two moments in time-- the then-present 20th century and the next millennium, the 21st century.

Bashira saw the next millennium, which she names "the future," as an opportunity to abandon racism by "leaving that past behind you." In keeping with Bashira's vision of a racist free society in our next millennium, I decided to birth her *Bashira*, Predictor of Good News.

### ***Daraja (Bridge)***

My name is Daraja. I was born in December 1981. I am seventeen years old and a junior at McKinley High School. I'm the second oldest in my family. I have four brothers and one sister.

Both of my parents graduated from Grambling University. My mother is a cocktail waitress at the Country Club of Baton Rouge and my father is a state trooper. I don't go around looking up to other people. I don't really try to make myself like anybody else. The only person I try to be like is me. I want to someday own my own business. I'm not sure what kind of business but I still want to be in Baton Rouge so that I can try to help the community out. Maybe I will start job programs or a homeless shelter. I enjoy spending time at the mall and hanging out with my friends. I'm an average student. I try to do everything to the best of my abilities. And a teacher should know that when I come into your classroom, I am going to try to do the best I can. I am not going to be a problem. And I'll make sure that the class goes as smoothly as I can.

Daraja was a very handsome African American young man. Standing five feet eleven inches tall with a butterscotch complexion and the charisma of Billy Dee Williams, one would think that Daraja was a "lady's man." But instead of being "tuned in" to the girls, Daraja seemed more interested in the needs, thoughts, and feelings of all others, both males and females. In a discussion on oral history, Daraja had this to say:

Usually, like when you're in a class, like history class, you just reading out of a book. It's not really affecting you like when you hear somebody speak who's been there, 'cause when you read a book you're just like okay this what happened. But, when they tell you a story and they been through it, you get more feeling from it.

What Daraja shared was that when you personally hear a story, the listener becomes one with the orator. The story is no longer some detached experience of a storyteller but, through dialogue, verbal communication creates, a community of empathy. When looking for a name, I came across this Kiswahili term which means "bridge" and thought of Daraja, a congenial being, whose interest was sparked when he found himself in situations where

the gap between himself and another was bridged by empathy created through a community of conversation.

### ***Osyimwese (God Created Me All Right)***

My name is Osyimwese. I am the second youngest child in a family of four. My father, who is now deceased, is my mentor. He struggled every day so that our family could have a decent living. Some teachers when they see me they say I look like a thug. But my appearance ain't got nothing to do with how I act or how I handle things. I am a honor student with a 3.7 overall grade point average. I play cymbals in our marching band and I've even played basketball for the school until it started interfering with my grades. Next year, I plan to attend either Tulane, Southern University, Michigan State, Howard University, or University of New Orleans and major in engineering.

I do have a little thug in me but it ain't all that. It's just the way I grew up. I live in a poverty community with drugs and guns. I've seen people get killed. I've been around people who killed somebody. I've been around drugs. I know a lot of people in our neighborhood, who use to steal. They're my friends. I be around them. I'm not going to leave them because they do the things that they do. They always going to be my friends, so I gotta stick with them. And I just pray to God that I don't get caught up. And I hope that when somebody comes back to get them or whatever that I'm not around or I just hope that they don't come back.

Osyimwese was a reddish brown skin young man with hazel green eyes.

Daily sporting cornrow-braided hair and sagging baggy blue jeans, my initial impression of Osyimwese was that he was a "thug." Yet, in his articulation about his appearance, Osyimwese informed me: "Some people say I look like a thug, but, my appearance ain't got nothing to do with how I act or how I handle things." Definitely, Osyimwese was right. A graduating senior on the honors track, Osyimwese was very confident in his abilities as a student, and



was even more confident in the way he has decided to construct himself by disrupting the construction of who can be or what it means to be a thug.

Problematizing knowing by complicating reality was what seemed to be most fascinating to this brilliant young man. Seemingly, in the messiness of it all was where Osyimwese was able to identify the uniqueness of his self and of others who share his race signification. Discussing his experience in our African American studies course, Osyimwese had this to say:

This course differed a lot. In other history classes, they talk about blacks, but they never give the real true background to everything. They always talk about slavery this and slavery that, but they never talk about how hard black people actually worked. And they don't give us enough credit for all the things we actually did. A lot of stuff I didn't know that blacks did. Like, I didn't know that they had a bus boycott in Louisiana.

Like re-defining his thug image, Osyimwese's interest was drawn to his/her/stories that re-define African Americans' image. For him, a shift from the dominant narrative of "slavery this and slavery that" to "how hard black people actually worked" and to "all the things we actually did" makes messy most dominant discourse on African American identity. This messiness served to historicize, for Osyimwese, a different construction of African Americans' being in the Americas, that is from the docile slave to the empowered African American. Through his use of a proverbial we, Osyimwese was reminded that God made us all right. Thus, *Osyimwese* was birthed God Made Me All Right.

### ***Shafiiqa (Kindhearted)***

Hello my name is Shafiiqa. I am a graduating senior. I have two sisters who are both older than me. After graduation I plan to attend the University of New Orleans. I'm not sure what I want

to do yet. I keep changing my mind. Some days I want to be a lawyer. Other days I want to be a psychologist. And, just a couple of months ago, I thought about modeling. The person I look up to is my mother. She's a teacher and a single parent. She's always positive and I know that she will never tell me wrong. When I finish college, I want to get married, have two kids and get a good job. But right now I enjoy shopping, being on the phone, hanging out with my boyfriend, family and friends. When it comes to school work, I'm kinda lazy. I figure if I can pass my tests and not study then why study? Now, when it comes to basketball that's a different story. I love playing basketball. I play for our school and I practice all the time.

Shafiiqa was a beautiful African American woman with long black hair who stood five feet ten inches tall. In my view, Shafiiqa would make an excellent model or WNBA player. Always very gentle and concerned about others' feelings, Shafiiqa had this to say regarding the safe space of our African American studies class:

What I liked most about our class is that it is all black. To me, it's like you can like really express your views around black people, to me. Like if you have somebody white in the class with you, you don't say exactly how you feel, because you don't want to offend them in any way. But this class is cool. It's all black. We don't fight and we can speak freely without worrying about hurting each others' feelings or being politically correct.

Having learned that it is "politically incorrect" to talk race or be open about one's feelings regarding racism in the presence of white people, Shafiiqa wishes to create safe space. Shafiiqa's concerns remind me of gatekeeper ideologies--like political correctness-- that, in my view, enable racism to persist. As long as dialogues are sanctioned--by kindhearted, political correctness, and good intentions--inter-racial conversations on racism will rarely happen. Without such talk, I contend, racist views remain fixed and

racism continues to effuse throughout our society. Nonetheless, because of her good intentions and kind heart, I decided to name her *Shafiiqa*, Kindhearted.

### ***Assata (Warlike)***

My name is Assata. I am twenty years old. I am the only and youngest girl of three boys. And, I have two children of my own. A little boy who will be four very soon and a little girl who is two. Their father is incarcerated and that's goody for him. He got caught with a gun while he was on probation. I consider myself a hard working independent black woman. I've been living on my own since I was eighteen. I work. As a matter of fact, I've been working and I ain't never stopped. I just stopped working at McDonald's to start working at Kentucky Fried Chicken. The only reason why I quite McDonald's is because I make more money at KFC. I've got two children and I take care of them by myself. I know I miss a lot of days out of school; it's because I be tired from working and trying to take care of my children. The one thing I would want a teacher to know about me is that I am a hard worker. And, though I may not come every day, I will do my work. When I graduate from high school I want to become either a rapper or a cosmetologist. I enjoy rap and I love fixing hair.

Assata's name was chosen not because she was crazed with anger or belligerent but because she was a fighter. A dark brown, stout young woman with a stylish cropped short hair cut and standing five feet four inches tall, Assata was a diva and a single mother of two children, who fought only when she deemed it necessary. Assata had this saying about what provoked her to combat:

I mean, I ain't going to let nobody mess with me or my children. When somebody mess with me or them, that's when I fight. That is the only time I fight.

For Assata, fighting has meant more than just physical battles in her neighborhood. Fighting has meant going to school, working every day, and raising two small children alone. Assata has faced and weathered circumstances which would have caused many to give up. Yet, instead of giving up and quitting school, she remains in school and fights for a better life for herself and her children. Assata asserts:

I ain't quitting for nobody. To be somebody in life and to have a better life for my children I need my high school diploma. Without it I can't do nothin'.

At age twenty, Assata remains in school fighting the odds to receive her high school diploma (Byrne, Myers and King, 1991; Scott-Jones and Turner, 1990). Assata imagined that a better life would be hers and her children is once she completes high school.<sup>74</sup> Because of her fighting spirit, her will, and her determination, this diva carried the name *Assata*, Warlike.

### ***Nini (Industrious)***

Hi I'm Nini. I was born on July 6, 1981. I am a graduating senior at McKinley High School. During my free time I enjoy talking on the telephone and spending time with my cousin and my boyfriend. But I expect to work when I'm in school. And I expect for my teachers to teach. After I graduate from McKinley, I plan to attend Grambling University and major in business education. I want to one day become a college professor.

Nini was an extremely intelligent and studious young woman. Standing five feet five inches with short sandy brown hair and medium brown skin, Nini did

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<sup>74</sup>Please see Denise Taliaferro's (1998) dissertation, Education for Liberation as African American Folk Theory.

not take many things lightly, especially when it came to her education.

Sharing her more disheartening schooling experiences, Nini said:

You know, I really don't like classes that don't do anything. I have a class that I don't do nothing in and I be looking forward to getting out every day. 'Cause, sometimes its okay not to do work, but when you go to school, you expect to be taught. And if you ain't taught nothing, it like a waste of time. You don't need to be there.

Since time was of the essence for this young woman who aspires to be a college professor, she was always punctual and ready to work once she realized that African American studies was a *real* course:

When I first came in [ African American studies], Dhambizoa lied and told me: "come on in, we don't do nothin." And I came in there and you, the first day, you were like "go over the introduction with someone." And, I was like what? I thought we didn't do nothin' in here.

Once Nini realized that our class was about the business of working and learning, she earnestly participated to make our project a success. Reflective of her tenacious attitude, *Nini* was birthed Industrious.

### ***Bayyina* (Evidence or Proof)**

On September 15, 1982, a star was born. That star was me, Bayyina. I am a determined, loving, and hardworking young lady. I am the big sister to one brother and the loving mother of one daughter. I'm also an honor student and a junior at McKinley High School. After I complete college, I want to become an obstetrician. A few things that a teacher should know about me is that I'm a bottom girl and I'm smart, punctual, and make good grades.

Bayyina, a chocolate brown young woman with short sandy brown hair, stood five feet five inches tall. She was an extremely smart and inquisitive young

lady. Being told what to do or think did not resonate well with Bayyina. She stated:

Can't nobody just tell me any ole thang and expect me to believe it. I like to go out and find out stuff for myself.

For Bayyina, knowing was a journey that happens through exploration and a search for evidence or proof. In sharing her more positive experiences with oral history as a way of teaching, she asserted:

Oral history is learning history untold by people unless you like ques tion them or whatever. And it's not history found in no ole history book or stuff like that. With oral history we like go and find out the other side of the truth that's not talked about in the books. We search for knowledge.

Preoccupied with knowing a truth, for Bayinna, it was in the search for evidence or proof that truths unfolds. Hence, *Bayyina's* curiosity served as the means of her naming and she was called Evidence or Proof.

### ***Butu (Weary)***

My name is Butu. I am a graduating senior at McKinley High School. I play football and enjoy aggravating my friends. The people I look up to most are my coaches. Since I never really stayed with my father, my coaches have been the only men that I've really paid attention to. They talk to me every day and make sure that I stay on top of my grades. Until this year, I really didn't care about school much. I use to cut classes and stuff cause I really didn't want to be here. But, now I'm a senior and about to graduate, so it's all good.

Butu was a very handsome young man. He was deep chocolate brown and wore an Afro nicely tapered at his neck. Tired of being schooled with

irrelevant content materials, when Butu entered our class he had given up hope. He stated:

Before I started taking this class, I wasn't focusing on no diploma. I really didn't care. I just wanted to finish school. Okay, twelfth grade, I'm out. I didn't think about no diploma or anything else.

Butu's words and feelings are imitative of so many young people who are made tired by a schooling process (Bruner, 1996; Fordham, 1996). With curriculum content seen as irrelevant to his lived experiences, all Butu had hoped for was getting out. Yet, in our class, Butu's experiences served as the impetus for his learning and development. He said:

I started getting focused really. Cause the stuff that I was learning in this class was helping me really understand my everyday life.

Because Butu's attitude reflected so many tired students throughout this nation who are forced to digest meaningless curriculum content, as a representation of both himself and others who are weary from being caught in a nasty web of schooling<sup>75</sup> his name was henceforth *Butu*.

Through students'/historians' "My Story" collages and our interactions together, I learned of their interests, life styles, and aspirations. Facilitating our learning experiences, I found myself listening to and learning from students/historians. Moreover, as teacher/student in our educational milieu, I became cognizant of how yesterday's memories can serve as a site to politically resist traditional assumptions on knowing. Additionally, our experience together taught me how the fluidity of history as past, present, and

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<sup>75</sup>In my use of the word schooling I am once more referring to Shujaa (1995). Please see his text Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education.

future is now, enables oral history to inspire real education. In chapters five, six, and seven, I more candidly analyze students'/historians' experience with oral history as real education.



## **Chapter 5**

### **"Slavery This and Slavery That"**

*"To tell a story is to take arms against the threat of time, to resist time, or to harness time." (Portelli, 1991, p.59)*

My personal experience with oral history had informed me of its capacity to intimately weave a topic of interest with one's community insights while highlighting multiple voices situated in a past or present moment (Thompson, 1978/1988). Consequently, when I asked students/historians to describe oral history, I anticipated that, in my conversation with them, they too would recognize these elements in oral history and share with me their discoveries of oral history's ability to illuminate African American music (the topic of their oral history project) and the knowing(s) of their community, through silenced grass root voices omitted from United States history (Dean, Daspit, and Munro, 1998). Although students/historians did articulate this relationship, they did not present their understanding of these multi-dimensional yet connected facets of oral history in a nice, neat, succinct, and easily comprehensible order. Rather, during our interview sessions, they informed me of what oral history was by telling me what American history had not taught. Osymwese and Shafiiqa began articulating their definitions of oral history:

In other history classes, they talk about blacks but they never give the real true background to everything. They always talk about slavery this and slavery that. They never talk about how hard black people actually worked. [T]hey don't give us enough credit for all the things that we actually did. -- Osymwese

American history always talk about the same ole thang, slavery. I get tired of hearing about that particular part of history not focusing on what we [African Americans] have done, you know, that's been like real great achievements instead of "Y'all were slaves" and "Y'all had to work out in the fields."-- Shafiiqa

Like "shuttle work" (Portelli, 1991, p. 65), going back and forth in time with the present in mind, students'/historians' initial responses to my query regarding oral history as real education were given through contentions of for what and for whom American history had or had not been taught. Yet, by comparing and contrasting what they had learned and had not learned in American history, students/historians informed me--how oral history inspired real education.

### **Spoken Narratives: Disruptions of Time**

Often recognized by novice oral historians as incomprehensible events, Alessandro Portelli (1991) maintains that seemingly breached narratives are products of narrators prerogative to "place time in text." He argues:

[N]arrators are often quite creative with their handling of time. One is, in fact, more likely to find narrative devices akin to those of contemporary, even experimental literature, than to the linear disposition of historical narrative time. What has been said about avant-garde literature may sometimes be true for oral autobiographies or historical narratives: "traditional art may be said to place text in time; avant garde, or modern art in general, breaks the tradition and places time in the text." (p. 64)

Accordingly, as people tell their stories, narrator's time often disrupts fixed, rigid notions of chronological time and bridles time as a disjointed measure in a storyteller's memory. For me, students'/historians' messy muddling of time and events enabled oral history to be revealed as a site for political

resistance. Through their narratives, I learned that oral history either created tension or disrupted what students/historians had come to know at another juncture in American history. Bashira asserted:

I mean give us credit. We have blacks who have invented things. You know what I'm saying? But you never hear history books talking about that. It's always the negative part of being black.

As an act of political resistance, I hold that alternative narratives are useful in re-imagining history. In my view, alternative accounts provide a venue for multiple perspectives and new possibilities for knowing.

Additionally, re-telling counter narratives, that is, sagas of contradiction, most often incite political resistance by complicating static notions of history and fleshing out history's more politicized agendas, which are often skewed by racist, classist, and sexist points of view.

Divided into three sections, this chapter highlights how students/historians weaved yesterday with today to define oral history as real education. In section one, entitled "Black People Should Know Where They Came From," I examine the consequences of how skewed perceptions of history alter both knowing the past and understanding one's possibilities in the present. In part two, entitled "I Get Sick of Slavery Tales," I grapple with students'/historians' knowing of oral history as real education by juxtaposing a critical analysis of their American history textbook and the lessons they learned in American history with students'/historians' arguments against what the textbook and its lessons aim to teach. In section three, entitled "Silencing

**Voices: Crafting Experiences," I feature how students/historians came to know real education when oral history was used as a site for political resistance.**

### **"Black People Should Know Where They Came From"**

**As many students/historians reflected on lessons learned in oral history, their minds trickled back to instructions of their American history classes. Most students/historians informed me that their American history text had only a few pages which gave attention to African Americans. Further, they held that the majority of its limited space was devoted to narrating African American experiences to "slavery" and African Americans as "slaves." Annoyed by these inferior perpetrations of blackness, student/historian Bashira, "threw me the hand" and declared with agitation, "To tell you the truth, I really get sick of hearing about slavery and how blacks were treated before my time or whatever." Moreover, she argued that history texts altered her ability to know history because "the books just tell half the story." Consequently, she asserted, " I don't think we should use the books. And, if we do, we need to use more books than what they give out in schools. Because those school books aren't telling us everything." Most often, history and its texts are used to document the struggles for power from a white, supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist perspective (hooks,1992). Historical accounts are divided by wars and dynasties, reigns and conquests, interpreted to ensure the continued dominance of the status quo. The voices of the masses in these sagas are rarely recognized unless the citizenry poses**

a threat to an existing political regime. In The Voice of the Past, Paul

Thompson (1978/1988) notes:

[T]he focus of history was essentially political: a documentation of the struggle for power, in which the lives of ordinary people, or the workings of the economy or the religion, were given little attention except in times of crisis such as the Reformation, the English Civil War, or the French Revolution. Historical time was divided up by reigns and dynasties. Even local history was concerned with the administration [over the masses] rather than the day-to-day life of the community and the street. This was partly because historians, who themselves then belonged to the administering and governing classes, thought that this was what mattered most. They had developed no interest in the point of view of the laborer, unless he was specifically troublesome. (pp. 2-3)

Historians, who propagate "tales of domination"<sup>76</sup> are presented in traditional historical texts as androgynous. An androgynous speaker is an orator supposedly erased from signification and representation because she/he embodies both male and female subjectivities. Madeline Grumet (1991) maintains that voice is a means to uncover identity camouflaged by the myth of an androgynous (sexless) speaker. She states: "drawn from the body and associated with gender, voice splinters the fiction of an androgenous speaker as we hear rhythms, relations, sounds, stories, and styles that we identify as male or female" (p. 278). I argue that race and class are also cloaked by the myth of an androgynous speaker. Thus, every utterance carries signification (Labov, 1980). Further, I assert, like bell hooks (1992), that the myth of an androgynous speaker is a facade used to reify the dominance of

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<sup>76</sup> Narratives that focus on "the struggle for power" and clandestinely center supremacist, white, Anglo-Saxon, male, middle class, Protestant (S.W.A.M.M.P.) perspectives are what I call "tales of domination."

white, male, middle-class subjectivity while marginalizing and silencing the identities of those who do not share these positionalities. Hence, historians' identities are erased and their voices are silenced<sup>77</sup> in an effort to present accounts which are seemingly unladen with biases. Yet, many writers of history possess, either physically and/or subconsciously, supremacist, white, Anglo-Saxon, male, middle-class, and Protestant (S.W.A.M.M.P.) subjectivities and positionalities. Their views, inherently cloaked by their subjectivity and the metaphysics of consciousness, greatly influence their perspectives and writings of history (Hoopes, 1979; Thompson, 1978/1988; Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a).

Specifically, speaking about the absence of African American knowledge, in "Dreamt into Existence by Others: Curriculum Theory and School Reforms," Bill Pinar (1992b) informs readers that:

The absence of African American knowledge in the curriculum of many African American schools is not mere oversight. Its absence represents an academic instance of racism. Just as African Americans have been denied their civil rights in society in general, they have been denied access to their history and culture--we might say their curricula rights--in schools. (p. 233)

Student/historian Bayyina held that the influence of a one-sided perspective of history encouraged young African Americans to embrace labels, which announce their ignorance of self and African Americans' history. She said:

Some black people have this attitude like they don't care. They be calling each other nigger or Negro or whatever. It's because they

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<sup>77</sup>Paul Thompson (1978/1988) posits that people are erased in traditional history books. It is this erasure of people and their respective subjectivities and perspective positionalities that I am referring to as silenced.

don't know. They don't know what's really going on or what has happened or whatever. They don't know their history.

In keeping with Bayyina's contentions, Pinar (1992b) professes, "We are what we know, as well as, we are not what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves--our history, our culture--is distorted by deletions and denial, then our identity--as individuals, as Americans--is also deleted" (p. 232). I contend that by silencing and erasing the histories of those that were enslaved, American history texts share notions of enslavement that cross generational lines and breed inferiority in the many sons and daughters whose ancestors were enslaved. Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/19981) held:

[T]he Negro, according to this point of view, was an exception to the natural plan of things, and he had no such mission as that of an outstanding contribution of culture. The status of the Negro, then, was justly fixed as that of an inferior. (p. 22)

However, finding offensive notions which diminished African Americans' worth, student/historian Shafiiqa claimed:

I get tired of hearing about that particular part of history [enslavement], and not focusing on what we have done, you know, that's been like real great achievements instead of "Y'all were slaves," and "Y'all had to work out in the fields."

As students/historians resisted "slavery"<sup>78</sup> tales, they likewise resisted tales of domination. American history textbooks giving primary attention to "slavery"

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<sup>78</sup> I place quotation marks around "slavery" for two reasons. First, I am referring to an institution in American history of which most texts, in my view, give little attention to insurrections or rebellions. Through this omission, I hold that those who were enslaved are pictured as if they willfully complied with their servitude. Second, I join many others African American intellectuals who remember that "slavery" was one of the most, if not the most horrific human holocaust in history and call it *maafa*. See page 128, n. 86, for further explanation.

and their tales of domination both teach and reinscribe social hierarchies.<sup>79</sup>

Students of American history are covertly taught that, in the history of American society, it is white people's place to dominant. Hence, given no counter-narratives while hearing and learning continuously "slavery this and slavery that," students/historians were informed of not only the hierarchial power relationship between master and slave in the past, but also of the hierarchial power relationship between white people and black people<sup>80</sup> in the present. However, contesting traditional history's attempt to indoctrinate inferiority, students/historians verbalized two reasons for their agitation with "slavery" sagas. One, they were bothered by how their textbooks always reminded them of "slavery."

I really get sick of hearing about slavery and how blacks were done before my time or whatever.--Assata

American history is just about white people. --Nini

And two, they were upset that history textbooks or historians rarely give attention to other African American perspectives in America's history.

I mean give us credit. We have blacks who have invented things. You know what I'm saying? But you never hear history talking about that. It's like it's always the negative part of being black.--Bashira

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<sup>79</sup> Many theorists talk about the use of hidden curriculums used to maintain existing social orders. See McLaren (1994), Apple (1990), Gramsci (1975), Freire (1970/1997).

<sup>80</sup>See Paulo Freire (1970/1997) and his theoretical conversation concerning lessons learned in order to maintain oppressed/oppressor relationships. Also see Amilcar Cabral (1970) "Return to the Source."



**There is more out there to learn about than Americans  
in society put out in their history books. --Akua**

**Regular history books don't tell you [much] about black  
people.--Assata**

**Yet, Dhambizoa seemed to be somewhat tolerant of her history texts' claim to  
knowledge, more so than the other students/historians. She stated:**

**You going to get it [history] from the way somebody else sees it.  
I mean, the textbook may have it one way because it's going to  
be written the way that person saw it. But someone else may see  
it a different way. It may be similar to that way [told in history books]  
but it is not going to be exactly the same.**

**Dhambizoa argued that one's perspective is inherent in the re-telling of a  
saga. Stating "[y]ou going to get it [history] from the way somebody else sees  
it," she expressed a high level of sophistication in her thinking, exhibiting an  
understanding for innate conflicts in perspectives which inhibit a truth's ability  
to define reality.**

**Peter Taubman (1993), in an analysis on Lacan, explicates more fully a  
rationale for contradictions embedded in knowing "truth."<sup>81</sup> Taubman  
contends that as one attempts to know fully an experience, those attempts are  
made virtually impossible. All one can truly know will reside in the references  
of his or her autobiography. He states:**

**The narcissistic pleasure gained from its apparent fascination is a  
lure which seduces and traps, for as the subject becomes entranc-  
ed with the fascinated gaze of the Other which carries back the  
subject's ego-identity, the subject wants to be seen more fully, to  
be seen in its plenitude. The impossibility of fulfilling this need is**

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**<sup>81</sup>My use of the term "truth" here refers to reality or what I call "a real." A real, in my view,  
is a diverse weaving of autobiography, community, the past, and the future meshed together to  
enable one to understand or name a truth in a moment in time.**

profoundly unsatisfying and results in the desire to become that which the Other is seemingly fascinated with, to become that which the Other desires. (Taubman in Pinar, 1993, p. 289)

Lacan expresses it this way, “[y]ou never look at me from the place from which I see you” (Taubman in Pinar, 1993, p. 289). Experiencing the impossibility of a universal truth leads one to accept that a real is a process articulated through the realities of a knower. Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991) also discusses the autobiographical nature of knowing. In When the Moon Waxes Red, she writes:

The real? Or repeated artificial resurrection of the real, an operation whose overpowering success in substituting the visual and verbal signs of the real for the real itself ultimately helps to challenge the real, thereby intensifying the uncertainties engendered by any clear-cut division between the two. (p. 36).

Like Dhambizoa, Minh-Ha and Taubman are explaining that what we see, hear, feel, and know--are vacillations of shared knowledge. An Other's knowing helps shape or frame what we see. Yet, what we see is articulated through our experiential framing of the past and our desires for the future.

Though speaking specifically about identity formation, I think Pinar's (1992b) argument regarding the “politics of identity” is also applicable to Dhambizoa's claims on truth. Pinar holds that in studying the “politics of identity, we find that who we are is invariably related to who others are, as well as who we have been and want to become” (p. 232). In this light, knowing is an intricate interplay between past and future right now. As such, in recognizing a truth/ a real/ a history, past influences shape what one may or may not come to know and, consequently, what one may and may not

become. Hence, without knowing a past from various insights or by informing knowing with deletions of various perspectives, one's present truths and realities are distorted and inhibited. Accordingly, Carter G. Woodson (1922/1928b) in the preface of The Negro in Our History argued, "those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history." However, Malcolm X (1967/1990) confronted this issue and helped Bayyina and the other students/historians better understand their history as a moving force in reshaping their future. Deconstructing the word "Negro," Malcolm X asserted:

One of the main reasons we are called Negro is so we won't know who we really are. And when you call yourself that, you don't know who you really are. You don't know where you came from, you don't know what is yours. As long as you call yourself a Negro, nothing is yours. No languages--you can't lay claim to any language, not even English; you mess it up. You can't lay claim to any name, any type of name, that will identify you as something that you should be. You can't lay claim to any culture as long as you use the word Negro to identify yourself. It attaches you to nothing. It doesn't even identify your color. (p. 26)

Though Malcolm X does not address the term "nigger,"<sup>82</sup> in his definition of "Negro," I argue that in defining "Negro" he is likewise defining "nigger." The connection between Malcolm X and the desires of students/ historians is that of knowing. Students/historians wanted to know their history. Being a Negro or a "nigger" would not outweigh their opportunity to learn perspectives which

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<sup>82</sup> "Nigger" is a word derived from the Spanish expression "*Negri*". The term in Spanish means "the black." Historically this term has been constructed to signify ignorance. See Wynters, 1996.

contradicted knowing blackness in America today and change their naming of themselves. Butu explained:

Like some people when they first came into this class. Well, some people changed over time. The more we learned about ourselves, less we appreciated the word [niggah]. Like Osayimwese, he use to be 'man n [niggah] this and n [niggah] that. I don't say it [nigger] now. I hardly ever hear him saying it [nigger] either.

With breaches created through learning alternative perspectives in oral history as a site for political resistance, I hold that students/historians came to realize multiple viewpoints of "what it meant to be Black in America today."<sup>83</sup>

Osyimwese stated:

I learned that it's [African American history] more deeper than what I thought. I ain't just no black born in America or nothing like that. All the things that everybody went through before we did get here. How they made it and how smart they was, they mighta been [non] literate or whatever but they did have some kind of sense to builds drums and whatever. They had to be pretty smart to do stuff like that or even think like that.

In my view, as students/historians collected spoken memories, new knowledge evolved. This knowledge served to disrupt, redefine, and politically resist what students/historians had come to know as Blackness<sup>84</sup> in their American history text.

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<sup>83</sup> You may recall that, in chapter four, students/historians gave their initial understanding of what it means to be black in America today. If necessary, please reference this chapter for further clarity and to see the connection of this phrase with what we came to know as African American history.

<sup>84</sup> Here, Blackness is used to connote the construction of black and its ability to label and give meaning to a people. Therefore, here, I have chosen to capitalize black.

## **I Get Sick of Slavery Tales**

In students'/historians' United States history text, The American Tradition, Green, Becker, and Coviello (1984) re-create three periods in American history: "slavery," the Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>85</sup> As students/historians had rightly asserted, of these three moments, "slavery" was given the most attention.

Initially, I was very uncomfortable with students'/historians' use of "slavery" to describe our ancestors' forced bondage. Like the other students/historians, Shafiiqa expressed ennui and irritation by repeating what she was taught: "Y'all were slaves and y'all worked in the fields." Whenever I heard them say "slavery," my flesh would crawl and my mind would quickly translate their use of "slavery" to enslavement. Narrated in most traditional historical discourses, I hold, "slavery" is a sexless, raceless, class-free legend used to exempt enslavers from their role in enslaving African American people as property while simultaneously reinscribing the permanency of racism.<sup>86</sup> Enslavement, on the other hand and in my view, is an active saga that names actors and exemplifies how our enslaved fore-parents were forced into objectivity by those who profited from their oppression. Consequently,

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<sup>85</sup> Green, et al. use this latter term very loosely and ignore that there were various civil rights movements in United States history. The particular period that they focus on is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's.

<sup>86</sup> I hold that by exonerating any facet, this great tragedy of enslavement is ignored for what it was, and the involvement of people as subjects is concealed. By taking actors out, accountability is disregarded. Hence, racism, a primary justification for the institution of "slavery," is likewise hidden. In my view, as long as any tenets of racism are overlooked in the past, the present or the future, then racism will continue to permeate this society.

enslavement places people back in the story and holds those involved in sagas of enslavement accountable for their actions. In time, as students/historians used "slavery" to express their indignation, I joined them in their contempt for "slavery" tales.

In their American history text, Green et al. (1984) introduce "slavery" as follows:

The culture and economy of the South depended on cotton production for export. Demand for cotton soared as textile factories in the northern states and Europe found faster, cheaper ways to make cloth.

Southern planters rushed to meet the demand with the help of slave labor and the cotton gin. Cotton production went from 200,000 bales a year in 1800 to 2 million bales by the 1830's and 3 million by the 1850's. In the 30 years before the Civil War, cotton accounted for more than one half of the total value of American exports. The increase was due mainly to the spread of the plantation system into new areas. The plantation was the basis of the southern society (p. 222).

At first glance, one may think the above story line suggests that enslaved African people willfully complied with their enslavers' rush to meet industry's need for more cotton.<sup>87</sup> However, upon closer examination, one realizes a significant relationship is crafted through the use of the conjunction "and" which connects those who were enslaved to the cotton gin. Green et al. state, "Southern planters rushed to meet the demand [for cotton] with the help of slave labor and the cotton gin" (p. 222). I hold that the connector "and" serves to de-humanize those who labored as enslaved subjects. In their opening

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<sup>87</sup> My use of "enslaved" and "enslaver" is a reminder of how the horror of enslavement is hidden and denied by the use of such terms as "slaves" and "planters."

lines, Green et al. remove spirit and being from enslaved Africans by informing readers that, like the cotton gin, slave labor was a mere commodity. As such, the cotton gin, a non-human tool, is likened to slave labor, a dehumanized commodity, and both are seen as functional instruments without desires.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, enslaved subjects are constructed as mere machinery used to enable southern "planters," their enslavers, to quickly and efficiently fulfill northern states' and European demands for more cotton. However, usurping Green et al.'s constructed simile between slaves and the cotton gin, student/historian Bashira had this to say:

I'm like tired of history. I mean, give us credit. We have blacks who have invented things. You know what I'm saying? But you never hear history books talking about that.

Here, Bashira reinserts the human element Green et al. erase. In stating "we have Blacks who have invented things," she deconstructs the analogy made between the enslaved and a thing. She holds that slaves were not objects but living, thinking beings "who have invented things."

Yet, continuing their four-page discussion on slavery, Green et al. (1984), remain committed to their efforts to dehumanizing enslaved African and African American people. They claim:

The lower class was known as "poor white trash." They were poverty-stricken people who lived on the poorest lands. They made up less than 10 percent of the white population. Also in the lower class were White farm workers and tenant farmers .... Lower than whites on the southern scale were the free Blacks .... At the very bottom of southern society were slaves. (pp. 222-223)

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<sup>88</sup>By this I mean the enslaved were tools whose desires were those functions they had been purchased by enslaver to fulfill.

Green et al. persist in constructing “slavery” by belittling those who were enslaved. However, serving dual purposes, Green et al. in this “slavery” tale situate the socioeconomic position of the enslaved to inform readers that slaves were at the bottom of the South’s socio-economic strata and that they were positioned two tiers below poor whites, who were considered trash. Beneath trash, the “slaves” were not just non-human but sub-human. Since trash is generally rendered worthless, Green et al. covertly instruct students that enslaved African and African American people were less than worthless. What they obscure in this tale is that the enslaved’s socioeconomic position made the South’s class rankings possible. Osayimwese recollected:

In American history classes they always talk about slavery this and slavery that [but] they never talk about how hard black people actually worked. They don’t give us enough credit for all the things that we actually did.

Osayimwese maintained that through skewed story lines, students of history are misinformed of African and African American worth. Veiled in Green et al.’s narrative is the perspective that many highly talented and skilled African and African American people made the South’s socioeconomic levels possible, and not because they were beneath trash.

Telling a different tale, several historians hold that Africans were stolen from their lands and forced into enslavement because they were professional farmers, artisans, and craftsmen (Genovese, 1972/1976). Specifically, in Eugene D. Genovese’s (1972/1976) Roll Jordan Roll: This is the World the Slaves Made, historian Marcus W. Jernegan declares, “It is hard to see how the eighteenth-century plantations could have survived if the Negro slave had



not made his important contributions as artisans" (pp. 388-389). Moreover,

Genovese states:

During the colonial periods the plantations of Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina hummed with the sounds of the blacksmith and the carpenter, the cooper and the stone mason, the miller the shoemaker. The wealthier plantations resembled industrial villages. (p. 387)

Acknowledging the presence of skilled laborers found in enslaved communities, Genovese raises a fascinating point. Though many of the enslaved specialized in their craft, most received no money for their services.<sup>89</sup> Genovese's story, in my view, disrupts the American dream that hard work and *a lil'* knowledge results in greater economic opportunities. When illuminated from this perspective, I contend, slavery is seen as the paradox of the American dream.

### **Racing a Wrong**

Race does not enter Green et al.'s (1984) conversation until they begin to describe "slavery" as "a peculiar institution" (p. 223). Here, race is used as a cliché to assert that everybody did it (enslaved others), but at least in the United States everybody was not enslaved. Green et al. maintain:

Slavery was called "peculiar" because it existed in only one part of the country. Actually, slavery had existed in many different cultures throughout history. But slavery in America was different from the slavery of ancient Egypt or Rome. In those societies, almost anyone might become a slave if taken as a captive in war. In America, slavery was based on race. (p. 223)

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<sup>89</sup> Please see Randall Robinson (2000) The Debt: What America Owes To Blacks.

Here, Green et al. (1984) seek to validate America's slaving practices.

Omitting very pertinent information about the institution of enslavement, they blend facts with fiction to justify American enslavement. Asserting previously that a slave's worth was less than trash, Green et al., I hold, argue the credibility of enslaving blacks based on their earlier claims, which constructed those who were enslaved as worthless.<sup>90</sup> However, student/historian Nini challenged their skewed racist perceptions by revealing biases of "American history." She argued:

American history is just about white people. It's white people who did things in America. Just because black people are from Africa, they brought us over here, it doesn't mean they did not do anything in America. They don't teach any of that in American history.

Through tactful scorn, Nini dismantled Green et al.'s straw man postulate to justify why "slavery" is "a peculiar institution." Maintaining that Africans could not have been worthless since "they were brought over here," Nini questioned Green, et al.'s claim of the uselessness of those who were black and enslaved. Her contention also served to emphasize other holes in Green et al.'s argument. By insisting, "they brought us over here," Nini alluded to how we, descendants of Africans, were brought to the United States. Unlike Egypt, Rome, and even other parts of Africa, Anglo-American and other European enslavers enslaved "a captured people rather than a conquered people-- since they [Africans] were forcibly exported from their homes in Africa" (Mazuri,

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<sup>90</sup> It is a fact that African Americans were enslaved but that they were worthless is fiction.

1995, p.1). Consequently, in other countries slaves were captives of war, while in America those who were enslaved were taken from their homeland.<sup>91</sup>

Barbara Christian (1987) in Ethnic Notions holds that knowledge Nini so candidly expressed--imaging Green et al.'s (1984) "slavery" tale as problematic--is a very powerful act. Christian argues that, without this knowledge, misrepresentations not only are ascribed to African Americans but . . .

we [African Americans] become seen that way [with bastardized imagery], we are even perceived that way even in terms of public policy and our [African Americans] lives are lived under that shadow.

Other historians in Marlon Riggs's (1987) film Ethnic Notions argue that distortions of blacks like those presented by Green et al. have historically been intentional. Specifically, they contend that after emancipation the media constructed African Americans as grotesque, worthless, lazy, and contrite. These misrepresentations of blacks, according to Ethnic Notions historians, were used as a source of propaganda to convince white audiences of the necessity for United States enslaving practices.

### **Half theTruth**

Notwithstanding the effects of their imaging, Green et al. continue their "slavery" saga by turning their attention to the unspeakable tragedy of the

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<sup>91</sup> Yes, I am mindful of the slavery tale in which many historians often argue that those who were enslaved were also the spoils of war acquired from inter-and intra-"tribal" conflict. While in some cases this was true, in others it was not. In these latter cases, Europeans went to Africa and stole human beings for cargo. Since this tale is not often illuminated, I am making a conscious choice to highlight it here.

Middle Passage. Reporting that many captives "died from epidemics of small pox and other diseases. . . hundreds of thousands survived," (p. 224) they minimize this most horrific voyage across the Atlantic to virtually nothing. Once more, Green et al. construct the enslavement of African and African American people as unmarred. Yet, Lerone Bennett (1995) in The Black Holocaust, gives very different perspectives. He finds:

The slave trade was a "kind" captain forcing his suicide-minded passenger to eat by breaking his teeth, though, as he said he was "naturally compassionate."

The slave trade was a bishop sitting on an ivory chair on a wharf in the Congo and extending his fat hand in wholesale baptism of slaves who were rowed beneath him, going in chains to the slave ships.

The slave trade was deserted villages, bleached bones on slave trains and people with no last names. It was Caesar Negro, Anglo Negro, and Negro Mary. (p. 3)

Bennett rendered versions of the Maafa <sup>92</sup> that Green et al. neglect to tell/tale.

He featured perspectives that challenge the sanity of enslavers whose evil dispositions de-humanized them as they sought to erase the humanity of

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<sup>92</sup>Maafa is a Kiswahili term which means "great tragedy." By many African American intellectuals, Maafa is used to denote the Middle Passage "which resulted in the overwhelming de-population of the African continent and the forced enslavement of African men, women, and children in the Americas and Caribbean over a period of nearly 500 years, from 1442 to 1888" (New Orleans Maafa Committee, 2000). In Yurugu, Marimba Ari (1994) uses Maafa to express "the great suffering of our people at the hands of Europeans in the Western hemisphere" (xvi). Also see Charles Johnson's (1990) The Middle Passage and Nah Dove (1998) Afrikan Mothers: Bearers of Culture, Makers of Social Change.

those they enslaved.<sup>93</sup> Questioning traditional historians innocence in their habitual writings of his-story, student/historian Osimwese insisted:

They [historians] don't give you the full of everything. They give you what they know. They might not even give you everything they know. They might not want to put everything in the books.

Here, Osimwese expressed his doubt in historians ability to w/right truth. By emphasizing, "they might not even give you everything they know," Osimwese joined James Loewen (1995) in revealing his mistrust of history writers. Loewen argues that historians often leave out various views in an effort to heroify particular subjects in history, a process he refers to as "heroification." For example, Loewen points out that, although many contemporary American history textbooks mention the horrors of enslavement, this narrative is situated "into the old progress as usual story line" (p. 135). In this tale, "the United States is always intrinsically and increasingly democratic and slave-holding is merely a temporary aberration, not part of the big picture" (p. 135). In my view, the influence of this story line is blasphemous. The story creates "slavery" as a justified evil while simultaneously creating abhorrence in many children of enslaved African and African American fore-parents. Through this U.S.-progress-as-usual story line, descendants of enslaved African and African Americans are not informed of their predecessors' accomplishments. Hidden in this narrative is the perspective that many highly talented, noble, and scholarly African and African American people were

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<sup>93</sup> Paulo Freire (1970/1997) in Pedagogy of the Oppressed also talks about how, in an attempt to dehumanize subjects, as oppressors oppressed, they themselves were dehumanized. For a more candid discussion of this topic, please see Freire (1971/1997).

deliberately enslaved. And, that the blood, sweat, tears, and death of these Americans, the students'/historians' ancestors, made America "the land of plenty" and "the home of the brave" (Genovese, 1971).

### **Rationalizing Insanity**

By using an androgynous voice to articulate multiple experiences, Green et al. (1984) continue their bastardized imaging of enslaved black people. Stating that many slaves rebelled against their masters for a variety of reasons, such as being made to "live in crudely built, one room cabins with no furniture" (p. 224), or having to produce gardens to grow vegetables to accompany their customary diets of hominy, fatback, cornmeal, and salt pork diets, or being disciplined for "oversleeping or using a less than humble tone of voice," (p. 224) Green et al. once more portray enslaved African people as worthless and deserving of their lot. I hold that through such narratives traditional historical discourse becomes a very productive source of governance over colonialized subjects who look to history as a means for understanding "the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives" (Thompson, 1978/1988, p. 2). In my view, through these politicized sagas, people are informed that their struggles are meaningless. For example, in Green et al.'s text, tales of African Americans' experiences in the Americas discuss enslavement as if African/African American captives willfully complied with Maafa, the horrific conditions of their forced servitude. Occasionally, Nat Turner and John Brown are thrown into a narrative to show instances of slave revolts that ended in the deaths of the instigators as well as

their followers. Yet, what they do not discuss are the stories of successful resistance--slave revolts like that of the Maroons of Jamaica. The Jamaican Maroons not only staged a successful slave revolt but also established their own colonies in the hills of Jamaica (Woodson, 1922/1928b). Narratives such as those about the Maroons present a different truth and pose a danger to existing power relations by informing subjects marginalized through vestiges of racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, and colonialization "that there exist histories that are contradictory to those we know" (Marks, 2000, p. 91). The Maroon her/his-story shows an event in historical time where marginalized subjects not only fought back but won. The Maroons narratives contradict the sagas of unsuccessful insurrections and rebellions and, in doing so, become a site for political resistance.<sup>94</sup> For, in the Maroons tale, the victor is no longer the powers that be but rather, in this instance, the victor is the oppressed. I agree with Thompson's (1978/1988) contention that, as long as narratives like those of the Maroons are silenced, history reifies "the very power structure

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<sup>94</sup> When narratives contradict his-stories gleaned from a supremacist, white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, male, Protestant (S.W.A.M.M. P) frame of reference, these epics, in my view, are sites of political resistance. Particularly in America, a place colonized by S.W.A.M.M.P.s, I hold that their discourse on history has been written purposefully to inform present generations--based on their subjectivities in relation to these his-story claims--what they can and cannot do on American soil. Further, I contend that by informing present generations of their possibilities and limitations hinged on their respective subjectivities, existing social relations remain intact. However, I likewise believe that when dominant tales of the S.W.A. M.M.P. are problematized by different versions of history/truth, in which who gets what, when, where, and how are not the powers that be, an alternative narrative is rendered and resistance to a S.W.A.M.M.P. construction of the history/knowledge is made possible. Since the construction of knowledge is, in my view, a political act then counter-narratives which construct alternative epistemologies are acts of political resistance. See also Foucault in Ransom, 1997.

[which] work[s] as a great recording machine shaping the past [and the present] in its own image" (3).

Yet, insisting that slaves had no need to resist, since the enslaved were provided with ample food and livable quarters, Green et al. (1984) omit narratives like those previously stated and the one that follows of Lavinia Bell, whose experience in enslavement is narrated in Blassingame's (1977) Slave Testimonies: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies.

She [Lavinia] was left for a number of days without anything to eat or drink. She says she tried to tear her eye out to eat them, she was so hungry. Still later, for some disobedience on her part, they hoisted her into a tree, locked a chain around her neck, and handcuffed her wrists, the marks being yet visible. There she was left for two days and nights, without a morsel to eat, being taunted with such questions as to whether she was hungry, and would like something to eat, she never giving the satisfaction of answering a word. She succeeded at length, by spitting on her hands, and slipping off her cuffs, with which she wrenched asunder the locks of the chains around her neck and fell exhausted on the ground.  
(p. 343)

Bell's narrative illuminates demented practices she endured at the hands of her enslaver. Yet, her voice is not recognized in Green et al.'s (1984) "slavery" tale. Silencing perspectives like Bell's, Green, et al., in my view, validate enslavers' insanity by once more making "slavery" seem all right. Additionally, arguing that the enslaved encouraged their ill-gotten fate, they hold that the establishment of "slave" codes was enacted when "slaves" resisted, and that "slaves" were punished when they escaped and were captured. Further, "slave" codes forbade those who were enslaved to leave



plantations or gather in large groups. In this argument, Green et al. ignore that, despite established "slave" codes, enslaved African Americans created new ways to commune and stage acts of resistance. Through slave songs, more widely known today as Negro Spirituals (Smitherman, 1986), and quilting, (Tobin and Dobbard, 1999) enslaved African Americans continued communing while orchestrating flights to freedom.

### **Silencing Voice: Crafting Experience**

In each vignette of their "slavery" sagas, Green et al. (1984) attempt to exonerate participants involved in enslaving African and African American people. Their story dehumanizes enslaved subjects and, in my view, creates a legend steeped in racism. On four pages of text and one pictorial image, Green et al. share a "slavery" narrative that spans over two hundred years. From a colonialist view, Green et al. wipe out enslavement's evil by distorting history which makes their fiction so unapparent that readers barely flinch. By situating "slave" stories in a progress-as-usual story line, Green et al.'s history, James Loewan (1995) contends, is seen as normal. Yet, as I argued earlier, through a progress-as-usual story line, like Green et al.'s, students/historians live and leave American history knowing little about themselves or their history. Two students/historians asserted:

Regular history books don't tell you about black people. I did not know where Ebonics came from. I didn't know that Africans were the first to domesticate sheep, goats, cows, and were the first to discover iron. They don't teach you that in regular history.  
--Dhambizoa

**There's more out there to learn about [African Americans] than Americans in society put out. Mainly in their books, you know they don't mention a lot about black people as much as they do about white people. But there's a lot out there to know. --Akua**

**Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) was convinced that by silencing historical perspectives of African American experiences, not only were learners misinformed about their past, but misconceptions were also created about the possibilities of their present genius. He held:**

**The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his [her] race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other people. (p. xiii)**

**Further, Woodson (1922/1928b) understood that silencing Negro history was necessary for those who had been subjugated to believe in their oppression, and those who were subjugators to believe in their superiority. However students/historians argued that oral histories as a site of political resistance enabled them to experience "real education" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a, p. 29) by revisiting and knowing history armed with multiple perspectives of a truth. Accordingly, student/historian Nini said that what she enjoyed most about our oral history project was "that it focused on black people doing positive stuff in our community. By looking at them, they helped me to understand what I can do." Student/historian Assata asserted that in oral history she learned history from "the people themselves who lived through bad times and good times and know what black life is like and what it entails."**

Lastly, recalling memories of jazz clarinetist Alvin Batiste's oral history interview, Butu revealed:

During Mr. Batiste's interview he had us doing different rhythms. Like one group of people would do this type of clap. Another group would do another type of clap, and when we put it all together it not only sounded nice but it had meaning. That's something that blacks did. Now, when I look at books or T.V. and they say blacks are the lowest level of people, now I know it's not so.

Combined, each above comment expresses how students'/historians' experiences with oral history as a site of political resistance provided them with alternative perspectives and various grassroots notions situating truths in their local community and their wider racial community throughout the United States. First, Nini contended that spoken memories informed her of how to be an active, constructive participant in her local community. Second, providing sagas of contradictions, Assata maintained that because of oral histories, she was now able to better understand the trials and tribulations of blackness, through the voices of those who have endured this coloring of our raced bodies. Lastly, Butu expressed how he used utterances of memory to resist racist notions that sought to harness African Americans' mental abilities and capabilities. Referring to African American history as the history of the people, Woodson likewise professed the transgressive power of knowing her/his-stories. In the preface of The Story of the Negro Retold, he wrote:

In proportion as Americans and Europeans become removed from such nonsense as the Nordic myth and race superiority, they will increase their interest in the history of other people who have accomplished just as much good as they have. So long handicapped by this heresy, however, they still lack the sense of humor to see the joke in thinking that one race has been divinely selected

to do all of the great things on this earth and to enjoy most of its blessings.

Woodson believed that by knowing the accomplishments of African Americans in American history, knowledge would serve as an instrument to amalgamate black/white racial types and erase racism. Woodson held that through alternative truths real education could be born. William Pinar (1992b), in my view, echoes Woodson sentiments. Pinar argues that black/white dichotomies, socially prescribed in African and Anglo Americans' experiences, are merely "two sides of the same cultural coin" (p. 233). In other words, like the id/ego split, both--black and white--prescribed meanings reassure an understanding of the other in order to recognize the existence of a self. Consequently, Pinar holds "because 'white' does not exist apart from 'black', the two co-exist, intermingle, and the repression of this knowledge deforms us all" (p. 233).

In contradiction to historians who misinformed students/ historians of "who they were, what they had done, and what they must do" (Woodson, 1998, p. 46), students/historians found that oral histories as sites of political resistance created ruptures in American history's homogenized tales which sought to erase or define their identity/ reality/ truth. Students/historians Bayyina and Daraja maintained:

Oral history is untold history. It's untold by people unless you question them. And, it's not in the books and stuff like that. With oral history, we go out to find out stuff that ain't in the text-book.

**It's learning history through talking with someone. It's learning history from someone else's point of view by hearing what they've gone through. I mean, you actually get history from them. By talking with people who were actually there.**

**Hence, as students/historians navigated knowing, oscillating back and forth between oral history and American history, they defined oral history by discovering that oral history can emancipate silenced her/his-stories and can be used to situate these sagas as sites for political resistance. In other words, students/historians informed me that Woodson's notion of real education is synonymous with oral history, when oral history narratives are situated as sites for contesting traditional assumptions on knowing and navigating truth.**

**In this next chapter, I analyze what students/historians learned through spoken memories as history, today.**

## **Chapter 6**

### **“Unveiling the Mystery”**

During our interview session, I asked students/ historians to describe their experiences in our oral history project. Bayyina replied, “In oral history, I learned untold history by getting a truth in all details.” Dhambizoa, likewise, asserted that in oral history she had learned to be a “completely nosey person to find out a lot of information that is untold.” Both Dhambizoa’s and Bashira’s reponses to what they had learned in oral history reflect students’/historians’ first interview session with renowned jazz artist and professor of music, Alvin Batiste. During his interview, which focused on the influences of jazz in African American culture, Batiste shared with students/historians the importance of knowing history in order to develop one’s own critical consciousness. Like Carter G. Woodson, Alvin Batiste explained to students/historians that true education means unveiling history to reveal a mystery. He stated:

Historians get the best information that is available at a particular time. But, libraries are where you uncover the history and reveal the mystery. Now, let me here you say “mystery,” again. Slower, myster-ry; again, slower, my-stor-y; again, slower, my-story. Yes, my story. If you don’t engage in books, if you don’t think about these book, then you will never gain your own consciousness--my story. True education involves being exposed to history, then being able to make it yours, which is the process of unveiling the mystery. (Batiste in Simpson et al. )<sup>95</sup>

Batiste professed that by unveiling the mystery, students/historians would also uncover historians’ more serendipitous claims to truth. He maintained:

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<sup>95</sup> Please reference students/historians booklet found in appendix E.

The ancient Egyptians originated what is known today as Egyptian mystery school. They taught in the mystery schools that a sound had color, a chemical had thought. Ancient Egyptian life was just like life in the United States. They were the first people to put forth a monolithic concept of God on high. Many of the great ones were black. But in history, if you read your history, they'll never say that. That is why you have to deal with the mystery. Because with history, everybody is trying to deal with their own perspectives and prejudices. (Batiste in Simpson et al.)<sup>96</sup>

Like Bayyina and Dhambizoa, other students/historians recollected memories as they shared with me what they had come to know in our oral history project.

Osyimwese shared:

Po'Kunditions, the group that I interviewed, brought stuff to the table. Like, other rappers rap about killing and dealing drugs, but they're rapping success and making it with the help of God and how they don't want to die and go to hell. They want to be knocking on heaven's door. That was the spiritual side of rap. They felt that they had a lot to bring to the table on that one, and they rapped about like if you going to be a garbage man you gotta be the best garbage man there is. No matter what you do, you can be anything, you can be a toilet bowl cleaner man but just be your best at it. Whatever you do, just be yourbest, and people will respect you for what you do. --Osyimwese

As I considered what students/historians said, I realized that their stories reflected what Vicki Ruiz (1998) termed "self-ethnographies" (p. 73).

According to Ruiz in "Situating Stories: The Surprising Consequences of Oral History," one of oral history's surprising consequences is reflectivity. For Ruiz, reflectivity is an active process. She argues that after oral history students create their text, many interrogate their findings by fusing yesterday's

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<sup>96</sup> Please reference students/historians booklet found in appendix E.

spoken memories with today's insights. The final outcome of this interrogation is often that students of oral history inscribe themselves as historical actors.

Featuring various perspectives of their oral history research on African American music in South Baton Rouge, Louisiana,<sup>97</sup> in this chapter, I highlight students'/historians' use of self-ethnography and forefront what they learned through oral history as real education. The chapter is divided into three sections. Beginning with section one, entitled "Taking Heed of Yesterday," I briefly examine what it means to take heed of yesterday today from students'/historians' perspectives. Section two, which is named for interviewee Alvin Batiste's childhood memory, is called "When I Was a Kid Your Ethnicity Made You Stand Out," situates Batiste's "re'co-lec'ion" by revealing yesterday's racist manifestations professed through students'/historians' self-ethnographies. Section three is entitled "Characterizing McKinley." This section uncovers complicated contradictions embedded in McKinley's historic ethnic difference while problematizing its historical characterization<sup>98</sup> as a black school.

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<sup>97</sup> Please note that throughout this chapter I italicize excerpts taken directly from students'/historians' magazine entitled "African American Music Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" (See Appendix E). I have chosen to italicize students' work, not to confuse the reader, but rather to illuminate examples or sites where students fetched sites of memories to situate themselves as historical actors. Additionally, in Ruiz's (1998) work the self-ethnographies she references are writings of her students. Here, self-ethnographies are referred to as reflections verbally shared during my interview sessions with students'/historians.

<sup>98</sup>Isadore Tansil, McKinley High School historian disclosed that when it was first erected and named McKinley High Colored, its naming characterized for whom McKinley was built, leaving no doubt as to what McKinley was- -a black school.



## **Taking Heed of Yesterday, Today**

During his interview, student/historian Daraja maintained:

[Oral history] is basically about learning where you come from and where we need to be heading. Just gives you a lot of information on blacks and how certain blacks had to sacrifice they self so they could make it better for us today. How we need to take heed to that and add on to it [their accomplishments], instead of looking at our situations and not do anything about it.

Fusing memory with insight, Daraja contended that through oral history he learned where he came from and where he needed to be heading. Specifically, asserting that his involvement with oral history informed him of "how we need to take heed to that [shared experiences] and add on to it [their accomplishments], instead of looking at our situations and not do anything about it," Daraja inscribed himself as a social actor capable of instigating social change. Osyimwese likewise shared oral history's possibilities in enabling students/historians to take yesterday's lessons to shed insight on the present:

In oral history, what people shared helps you to realize what was happening then is happening now. The stuff they was going through then, we going through it now. And, in order to [understand] our situation better we looked at what happen back then to try to learn stuff about today.

Osyimwese's contention of oral history echoes tenets of Akan's philosophical expression of *Sankofa* which means, "Go back to fetch it" (Willis, 1998, p. 189).

Imaged one way as a beautiful bird looking back at its feathers, *Sankofa* represents "looking to one's past or with a quest for knowledge, returning to the source"(p. 189). In keeping with *Sankofa*, Osyimwese links understanding

a past and taking heed of yesterday to comprehending a present. Locating importance in yesterday's memories today, he evokes what I call "memory as history."<sup>99</sup> Moreover, articulating the reflective power of oral history in situating the moment, he engages "self-ethnography" (Ruiz, 1998, p. 73).

Like Daraja and Osyimwese, bridging connections between lessons learned through their oral history project on African American Music with their life experiences, several students/historians actively engaged self-ethnography (ies).<sup>100</sup> Though most of their discussions showed thoughtful reflections, in my view, students'/historians' most profound insights were augmented during conversations on racism. In the next section, I highlight students'/historians' self-ethnographies which evolved as a consequence of their interview with jazz artist, Alvin Batiste on ways one's ethnicity makes a person stand out.

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<sup>99</sup> See chapter 2 sub-section entitled "Memory as History."

<sup>100</sup> Please be mindful that all students/historians did not engage, nor wanted to engage, self-ethnography as a consequence of investigating or writing spoken memories (Ruiz, 1998). Some students/historians participating in this study either did not recognize or refused to see elements of yesterday's memories in today.

***When I was a Kid . . . Your Ethnicity Made You Stand Out. (Batiste in Simpson, et al., 1999)<sup>101</sup>***

During his interview with students/historians, Alvin Batiste said, "When I was a kid . . . your ethnicity made you stand out." Specifically, speaking about language, Batiste claimed:

You people represent the most mature generation or the most Americanized generation, in that respect. Having lived for over sixty years, I'm always impressed with the fact that if you put somebody behind a screen and heard students talking they would be talking about the same way and many times using the same slang. When I was a kid it wasn't like that. Your ethnicity made you stand out. (Batiste in Simpson et al., appendix E)

Here, Batiste's posture suggests that today's African Americans students have become more assimilative in dominant United States culture. At the very least, with regard to language, Batiste maintained that ethnicity no longer makes a person stand out. However, reflecting on Batiste's comment, student/historian Butu revealed that, for many young African American people, their homogenized voice was an act of protecting one's identity against defiled representation.

Through his experiences with our oral history project, Butu recalled that he learned, "You can't speak out in the open in any kind of way. When you go places you have to conduct yourself like a civilized person." In contradiction to Batiste's assumption, Butu explained that an orally

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<sup>101</sup> Please reference students/historians magazine found in appendix E.

camouflaged voice, for some, is a deliberate and conscious act. For Butu, this awareness was revealed after interviewing local rappers from his South Baton Rouge community. Caught in a baffling dilemma of representing voice, Butu was faced with trying to decide which voice he should use to represent Po'Kunditions rappers, Shane Bennett and Cornell Moore-- Ebonics, his interviewees' native language, or standard English, the language signifying a literate culture. Giving in to the prevailing force of his fellow students/historians, Butu submitted to standard English's disciplining powers<sup>102</sup> and wrote Bennett's and Moore's speech as close as possible to an English verbiage. Frustrated, Butu felt that he had altered their voice. . .

'cause I did not want them to look like outcasts or anything. Even though I didn't agree with it [changing their words and phrases] it's something I had to do and deal with it.

What Butu resisted most was that other students/historians felt that he needed to change Po'Kundition's voice. Originally, Butu, like me, believed that if this was the way his interviewees spoke, then this was the way they should be represented in students'/historians' created historiography. However, other students/historians convinced Butu that his decision to represent Po'Kunditions was bigger than our personal affinity for Ebonics. Students/historians argued that the language Butu chose to present Bennett and Moore would inform their readers of not only Bennett's and Moore's race, but also of "where students/historians and their interviewees had been and what

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<sup>102</sup> See Michel Foucault (1977/1995), Discipline and Punishment: The Death of the Prison.

students/historians and their interviewees were likely to become."<sup>103</sup> Deferring to the desires of his classmates, Butu presented Po'Kunditions' voice in standard English.

Situating Butu's dilemma in a historical light, "Heritage" spiritual songstress Francise Williams shared with students/historians during her interview that "as enslaved Negroes adapted to their new surroundings and developed their language they began to see themselves in horrible conditions" (Williams in Fisher and Smith, 1999, appendix E). Here, Williams informed students/ historians that the origins of African Americans' harsh conditions in America started when enslaved Africans began to culturally adapt to their surroundings and formed a bastardized "slave speak." This plantation idiom today is more commonly referred to as Ebonics or Ebony phonic (Williams, R. 1975). And, according to Butu's self-ethnography, this idiom, which is burdened with Standard English's insidious demarcation, compels Ebony phonics speakers to use the King's speak [sic], so that their ethnicity will not stand out.

Other students/historians in their self-ethnographies offered various contentions about race, particularly how racism still inhibits America's most "Americanized generation" from being assimilated into mainstream United States culture.

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<sup>103</sup> By this students/historians were referring to their educational levels as well as their impoverished community and possibilities of their future destinations.

***When you say African you are talking about Americans whose ethnic legacy goes back to Africa. (Batiste in Simpson et al., 1999)<sup>104</sup>***

Speaking specifically about notions of racism in connection to raced bodies, through her self-ethnography, student/historian Assata explained, "Some white people think black people are dirty and don't take baths. That's why we [are] this color." Taken by surprise, I could not believe that in 1999 a beautiful young African American woman was not only aware of these adulterated notions of African American ethnicity, but was also willing to retell such lies. Assata concluded her statement with the question "You never heard that before?" Listening to Assata, my mind quickly drifted to my reading of David Sibley's (1995) text Geographies of Exclusion. In his book, Sibley theorizes a relationship between the color black, dirt, and filth with degeneracy theories posited by some contemporary social scientists. Though such claims have been proven fraudulent, these scientists illuminate racial difference by positing African American inferiority.

In their self-ethnographies students/ historians Dhambizoa and Akua both reflected on how racism controls minds. Yet, what they understood about racism varied in their perspectives. In Dhambizoa's self-ethnography, she held that racist postures professed by contemporary social scientists enabled

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<sup>104</sup> Please reference students/historians magazine found in appendix E.

the life force of racial hate to be perpetuated generation after generation. She argued:

It [defiled notions of blackness] explains why white people see blacks as nobody. It just basically shows the way the world is, you know. Some people, like Martin Luther King, say that one day we would be equal, but it shows you that it's still going to be that one person out there that's thinking one way to make him feel better about himself. And that influences the next generation and the next. So, there's always going to be some kind of hate out there.

Akua, like Dhambizoa, also reflected on the permanency of racism in her self-ethnography. She maintained:

Even though it's the nineties, quote unquote, there still is and will always be discrimination. You know a lot of people who don't like black people. It's always been that way. The world has always been centered around white people and it still does today .... White people think that black people are good for nothing and can't achieve anything and that they [white people] can do [every] thing.

Though Akua used the term *discrimination*, in my view, she is referring to racism. Borrowing from David Wellman's (1977) book Portraits of White Racism, Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997), in Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria, defines racism "as a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals that operate to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color" (p. 7).

In Akua's self-ethnography she held that racism has existed forever. She defined racism as the world being centered around white people. Though parts of Akua's assertion may be seen as accurate, other parts, I

assert, may be seen as more fallacious. A fallacy in Akua's argument presents itself twofold when one is made mindful that racism has not existed forever, nor was racism created because the world is centered around white people (Vail and White, 1991; Wynter, 1996). Rather, racism, as Dhambizoa alluded and other scholars contend, is "the belief that some races are biologically superior to others and therefore have the right to dominate." (Wynter, 1996)<sup>105</sup> Racism exists as a result of dominant groups thinking it is necessary to maintain their power over subordinate groups in order to feel better about themselves (Outlaw, 1996; Vail and White, 1991; Wynter, 1996). Nonetheless, couched in a contextual truth of her social reality, Akua's argument is real, for even today *Your Ethnicity [Makes] You Stand Out*.

What I found most fascinating about Akua's and Dhambizoa's self-ethnographies and their lessons learned in our oral history project was that their narratives revealed a racialized social psychosis that exists between blacks and whites who live in a racist society (Fanon, 1967). Akua asserted, "white people think that black people are good for nothing and can't achieve anything and that they [white people] can do [every]thing," and Dhambizoa contended "white people see black people as nobody". Here both students/historians claimed that whiteness and its presumed superiority is created through an inverse construction of who another is (West, 1993). Like Dhambizoa and Akua, Louis Castenell and William Pinar (1993) hold that

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<sup>105</sup>This is only one explanation for racism. Throughout this section, other rationales are also given.



**"European Americans are what they displace onto others, and their self representation requires repression of the 'other.' [Thus] the very complexion of one's skin, the nature of one's blood, and one's view of the world are all experienced racially" (Castenell & Pinar, 1993, p. 13). Toni Morrison (1990) refers to Castenell and Pinar's postulate as "American Africanism." According to Morrison, American Africanism is made possible. . .**

**through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette. American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom. (p. 7)**

**American Africanism, I contend, creates a knowing that misinforms the social values of European Americans and African Americans. Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) argued that misunderstandings of the social worth of both black and white people are not organic to the infrastructure of society but, rather, are learned. Alvin Batiste shared with students/historians that teachings skewed with racist ideologies were so important that "When [he] was in high school [students] had to fight to learn about African American culture." Woodson held that the omission of African American achievements from modern education's disciplines enables misinformation to permeate knowledge constructs of European American and African American learners. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) noted the following criticisms:**

**From literature the African was excluded altogether. He was not supposed to have expressed any thought worth knowing. The philosophy in the African proverb and in the rich folklore of that**

continent was ignored to give preference to that developed on the distant shores of the Mediterranean .... In history, of course, the Negro had no place in this curriculum. He was pictured as a human being of the lower order, unable to subject passion to reason, and therefore useful only when made the hewer of wood and the drawer of water for others. (pp. 19-21)

Woodson contended, however, that the failure to include African American achievements was not deliberately intended to inflict injury. Yet, he argued that exclusion nonetheless served to maintain and perpetuate existing social hierarchies between members of the black and white race (p. 17). Stating “[h]istory does not furnish a case of the elevation of a people by ignoring the thought and aspiration of the people thus served” (p. 24), Woodson maintained that breaking down racial social hierarchies could be accomplished through the study of African American deeds and be used to inspire “real education” (p. 29). With this knowledge, whites would no longer be left ignorant by the belief that they are culturally superior simply by virtue of their race, and blacks would be intellectually fortified through a knowledge base that refuted claims of their inferiority (Woodson, 1922/1928b).

*When someone is trying to tell a story or trying to carry a message across to somebody, they play music. (Kwaku Agyeman'yeboah in Stewart and McGee, 1999)<sup>106</sup>*

Students/historians Daraja, Nini, and Bashira likewise noted mechanisms used to perpetuate the fixity of racism and curtail real education.

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<sup>106</sup> Please reference appendix E.

In Daraja's self-ethnography, and in keeping with Woodson's contentions, he narrated:

They [Euro-Americans] don't want to be in the same places as us [African Americans]. I guess they want things back to the way they was at first--[white people] controlling everybody. It's just like, you don't want to go to the movies and somebody bring all their pets in there or something. Now, I'm not saying that we [Black people] are pets. I'm just saying that that's like how they look at us as slaves, like we are animals and unfit to go to school with their children.

Daraja's story used images to convey how one's ethnicity makes one stand out as not being fit to go to school with white children. Speaking specifically about de facto segregation permeating United States society, Daraja's self-ethnography grappled with de-segregation<sup>107</sup> today to locate reasons why black children and white children are still not going to school with one another. Additionally, narrowing her contentions to McKinley's majority racially segregated situation, student/historian Nini recalled, "Some people say that because it is a black school, the students are dumb because they black and go to McKinley." Expressing what rapper Shane Bennett calls the "down side of life," Nini's self-ethnography revealed -- and I agree -- that old tales of Negro intellectual inferiority inhibit white learners from wilfully attending the same schools with black learners.

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<sup>107</sup> I hold that de-segregation, deliberately hyphenated here, to separate "de" from "segregation," reflects re-segregating practices in allegedly desegregated schools. An example is forthcoming. Please read p. 159.

*Through rap lyrics you can see the other side of the rapper. That's the side that no one knows about, but everyone can relate to. It is the side that shows the down side of life. You know, the side that shows the troubles that life can take you through. (Bennett in Banks and Simpson, 1999)<sup>108</sup>*

Bashira reflected on those down sides of life that African Americans go through, a life further complicated by a white supremacist society. Likewise considering McKinley, she responded:

I'd rather [McKinley] be more... What do I want to say?...Interracial, like more whites than it is. If there were more whites here then hopefully other whites wouldn't be scared to have McKinley written across their chest, you know, being that McKinley is an all black school or whatever. This would be a sign that McKinley is just like any other school. It's no different from any other school. Like if you were to attend Baton Rouge High or Tara or Woodlawn or somewhere. McKinley is just like any other school... so people can hear it coming out of white kids' mouths instead of black kids' mouths.

Bashira's self-ethnography carries tones of mixed blessings. In her response, Bashira was very proud of McKinley. However, because McKinley is a predominantly black school, Bashira like her classmates, recognized that it is burdened with a coloring of blackness; that is, negative connotations associated with the color black and its people.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, I argue, since Bashira was situated in and influenced by a white supremacist society, she recognized, it were a natural happenstance, that her recognition of McKinley

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<sup>108</sup> Please reference appendix E.

<sup>109</sup> For further details, please see Morrison (1990), Riggs (1987), and West (1993).

being just like any other school would not deconstruct racist notions of McKinley or its students' marring as black and thus inferior. According to Bashira, deconstruction could only be achieved when people start to hear "out of white kids' mouths" that "McKinley is just like any other school." Keeping with Paulo Freire's notion of internalized oppression, I assert that Bashira's self-ethnography is burdened with internalized racism. Expressing the need for people to hear out of white kids' mouths that McKinley is just like other high schools in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Bashira resigns her voice to its proper marginalized space. Without being told, she concedes that her opinion means nothing. Paulo Freire (1970/1997) in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, contended that self-depreciation is a characteristic of oppressed people which

derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything-- that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive--that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (p. 45)

Bashira's search for justification, in my view, is also a request for prescription. She is looking for a cure for McKinley's connotation as a black, thus, a bad school. And, for her, the only remedy for McKinley's illness is for whiteness to proclaim it well (hooks, 1992; 1994).

Yet, like lessons learned regarding the intricacies of a blues performance, using more techniques and requiring more technical thinking about what one is doing (Porche' and Turner, 1999, in appendix E), Bashira's self-ethnography is a mesh of complicated instrumentalities. Though her contentions are apprehensive, they are simultaneously an expression of

pride. Bashira navigated this seemingly binary posture, because as she learned through Tabby Thomas's interview when he discussed the ability of the blues to be in a state of double consciousness as it simultaneously expresses *a humorous or defiant reaction to life's troubles* (Thomas in Turner, et al., 1999),<sup>110</sup> Bashira's self-ethnography likewise illuminated her "twoness,-- two warring ideals in one dark body," (Dubois, 1903/1995, p. 45). Identifying this twoness as double-consciousness, Dubois (1903/1995) theorized in The Souls of Black Folks:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 45)

Because of her double-consciousness, Bashira held connotations of blackness in a white supremacist society. Yet, their meanings did not totally consume her, for Bashira was not only black, but also a woman, an athlete, and I would add, a scholar. These subjectivities colluded and collided with Bashira's understanding of blackness. As they circulated within her one body, they formed breeches. I argue, like Foucault, that through these breeches modalities of resistance are created to obstruct the permanency of a grand

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110 Please reference appendix E.

racist epistemology (Foucault as cited in Ransom, 1997).<sup>111</sup> Thus, Bashira was able to articulate concurrently discontent and pride. Bashira's self-ethnography was not alone in resonating with Thomas's blues discourse. Akua's self-ethnography likewise embraced seemingly doubled contradictions. Similar to Bashira's comments on McKinley's black school situation, Akua held:

*The fact that it used to be an all black school and they, you know for the past few years, they recently integrated it with white kids, or McKinley's minorities, but you know, it's made it better as a high school. But you still don't forget about the fact that it was an all black school originally. And it's basically trying to help black children succeed in life.*

Supporting Bashira's suggested prescription, Akua also believed that the presence of white students made or would make McKinley better. Yet, in addition to Bashira's sentiments, Akua highlighted in her self-ethnography how school integration was another tenet that has been used "to make your ethnicity stand out."

In 1981, in an effort to desegregate the Baton Rouge, Louisiana public schools, McKinley was sanctioned by its local school board to house a magnet school program. Consequently, white students, black students, and even a few Asian students began going to the same school, but many were not in the same classrooms. Akua noted, "A lot of the kids you see here are black, and you don't see a lot of white kids or Oriental [sic], and if they are,

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<sup>111</sup> Please note that Foucault did not use the phrase "grand racist narrative"; rather, he used the phrase "the construction of power." For me, at this moment, they are one and the same.

they're basically mainly in the gifted program." In its current de-segregated setting, students at McKinley find themselves co-mingling in the entrance of their school's corridors and hallways but segregated in classrooms as soon as their class bell rings. For example, as Akua noted, in many schools like McKinley which house both a magnet school program and a traditional program, the majority of Euro-American students are found in the magnet program, while the majority of African American students are found in the traditional program. Under these circumstances, I contend, de-segregation informs its students that if black children and white children are to go to school together, then their learning must take place separately. Highlighting and expounding this posture, Janet Eylers (1982) in Re-Segregation: Segregation Within Desegregated Schools argues:

Re-segregation is a major threat to desegregation in that it reestablishes racial isolation presumably eliminated by the reassignment of students from school to school. Among its other consequences, re-segregation undermines the possibility for interracial/ethnic contact and equal status interactions, potentially limiting minority student achievement. (p. 1)

Additionally, Roy Brooks (1996) in Integration or Separation?: A Strategy for Racial Equity, maintains that "re-segregation perpetuates racial subordination and seriously affects the quality of education as well as the self-esteem of African American students". In my view, this is reflective of student/historian Butu's desire to have more white kids attend McKinley. Butu claimed:

It's [McKinley] a predominantly black school, so it's an okay school. But I think they should have more like a mix [of] people. Have more foreign students.



Here, Butu suggests, like Akua and Bashira, that with a more diverse student body McKinley elevates from its current “okay” status to a good school. I was curious to know what made McKinley so bad or merely okay. Butu replied:

I mean, it's not us, but it's like things that have happened before our time, like in the seventies or something like that, you know, like with the basketball team. I was once hearing one of the coaches say that McKinley has had a bad name since they went to go play somebody, I forgot the basketball team, and they started to fight or whatever, and that's been on our backs every since.

What Butu overheard was pieces of a 1969 incident that took place in downtown Baton Rouge. What he did not hear was the mystery, the my-story. Butu had not uncovered that the fight was in fact a race riot, and according to 1995 McKinley oral history participants,<sup>112</sup> brought about the death of three African Americans. In a slide presentation by members of the 1995 McKinley High School Oral History Project, participants noted:

In 1969, McKinley High played basketball against the all boys white school, Catholic High, for the first time. There was a riot in downtown Baton Rouge in which three blacks were killed.

Not being told about the deaths of three African Americans or that the fight/race riot broke out simply because a black team was playing a white team, Butu had not unveiled the mystery. Perhaps by uncovering this mystery, his self-ethnography would have enabled him to understand that the impact of

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<sup>112</sup> Please note that I was unsuccessful in my attempts to substantiate this claim through other documented sources such as newspaper clippings and even contacting students who attended McKinley at that time. No one knew of this incident. Now, does this mean that the event did not take place? To be perfectly honest, I still do not know, but my search is not over. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this project, I believe that referencing McKinley's 1995 oral history project will suffice. What I am suggesting here is that if Butu knew another perspective, then perhaps he would have surmised a very different view as to why white students seemed to resist coming to McKinley.

this event was historically situated and influenced by racism. Maybe then Butu would have been able to see a connection between what happened then--racist white folks resisting the desegregation of high school sports--with what is happening now-- racist white folks resisting sending their children to predominantly black schools.

### **“Characterizing” McKinley**

[W]hen McKinley was first erected and the school was started, it characterized who it was [for] so that there would be no doubt what McKinley was. It said “McKinley High School--Colored”. And that's what they meant for it. (McKinley Oral History Project, Summer 1995)

In the above quote, McKinley High School historian, Isadore Tansil, states that McKinley's naming “McKinley High School-Colored” announced to the world who would and who would not attend McKinley. Due to its segregated space, I argue, McKinley High School-Colored evolved into a place where African American learners, under the tutelage of teachers and administrators who cared about their learning and educative experience, experienced schooling as a site for political resistance. Further, I hold that despite the presence of various students'/historians' internalized racism, like yesterday, McKinley today permeates this very salient ethos, compelling African American learners to experience real education by navigating bastardized images which connect defiled notions of blackness to their schooling situations while basking in the realities of McKinley's greatness. Below, I give a brief historical synopsis of McKinley from its inception to the present.

In 1907, originally named Hickory Street School for Negroes and containing 49 pupils, McKinley began educating formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans through public fundings. Six years later, enrollment increased from 49 to 176, necessitating larger facilities to accommodate the city's educable<sup>113</sup> African American learners. At the end of spring semester, in 1914, the Hickory Street School for Negroes closed its doors, and in the fall of 1914, Baton Rouge Colored High School began teaching black students in East Baton Rouge Parish. Two years later, while women across the United States fought for suffrage, Baton Rouge Colored High School graduated its first class. The class of 1916 consisted of four members; all were African American females. By 1926, due to a growing student body, Baton Rouge Colored High School, like its predecessor, Hickory Street School for Negroes, outlived its usefulness. A new high school was erected and named in honor of former President William McKinley, a proponent of industrial education.<sup>114</sup> In 1954, the Supreme Court decided through *Brown versus the Board of Education in Topeka*, to mandate the end to segregated schools "at all deliberate speed" (Hudgins, H.C. and Vacca, R., 1979/1991, p. 281). Five years later, in response to the 1954 Supreme Court's decision, the Louisiana state legislature passed a law mandating de jure school segregation. The ruling stated:

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<sup>113</sup> See chapter 2, p. 40 for my use of educable.

<sup>114</sup> Information was gathered from "The History of McKinley" housed at the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Whereas, We believe that it is to the best interest of the school children in this parish, both White and colored, that we continue to segregate our school system; and

Whereas, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) has filed suit seeking to destroy the excellent school system now available to both races in this parish of East Baton Rouge;

Whereas, On Friday, October 30, 1959, the NAACP filed a motion for summary judgment asking immediate judgment designed to bring about immediate integration of the White and colored races in the parish school system;

Now, therefore, be it resolved, that this Board does hereby declare its resolution to maintain its public segregated school system, the NAACP to the contrary notwithstanding. (Morning Advocate, November 3, 1959)

Twenty-two years later, in 1981, McKinley High School was integrated through a federal busing mandate. After many white parents began removing their children from East Baton Rouge public schools, in 1982, McKinley formed a magnet program to encourage the return of white parents and their children. In 1994, Redbook, a national woman's magazine, dubbed McKinley the best high school in the state of Louisiana. Today, McKinley is nationally acclaimed for both scholarship and athletics. And, as students/historians frankly reminded me, "It's [still] a black School."

### **"It's A Black School"**

After Emancipation, southern African Americans seized the opportunity to exercise their rights as citizens to secure public education for all (Anderson, 1988; Dubois, 1903/1995; West, 1993). Yet, once federal troops were removed from the reconstructed South, newly instituted forms of slavocracy, sharecropping, and tenant farming suspended African Americans' prerogative for public education. Under these racist regimes the will of

planters-- descendants of former enslavers-- became the determining factor for African American schooling in the South. James Anderson (1988) in The Education of Blacks in the South asserts that many planters refused to allow or support education for blacks because planters feared that "learning [would] spoil the nigger for work" (p. 21). Planters linked the lack of education among African Americans to the maintenance of "their agrarian order." Anderson notes:

[P]lanters, with few exceptions, viewed Black education as a distinct threat to the racially qualified form of labor exploitation upon which their agrarian order depended. (p. 23)

Moreover, sanctions restricting African American education were federally legitimated through judicial precedents which supported either minimal or no education facilities for blacks.

Anderson reveal that in 1899, in Richmond County, Georgia, African Americans argued that the removal of their only black high school would be in violation of the separate but equal clause in the 1888 Supreme Court decision Plessy v. Ferguson. However, Justice John Marshall Harlan feared that requiring equal educational facilities for both blacks and whites would hinder educational opportunities for whites. Believing that the southern aristocracy would rather dismantle all public education than to provide equal education for blacks, Justice Harlan held in Cumming v. School Board of Richmond County, Georgia, that "black plaintiffs' demand for substantially equal facilities would damage white children without assisting blacks" (p. 192). This decision advertently justified sparse facilities or none at all for African American

learners. Student/historian Nini still perceivingng herself as educated under these racially sanctioned conditions, argued in her self-ethnography that because McKinley is a historically black school, it remains “raggedly.” She stated:

Mckinley is raggedy. Everything is falling down. It don't look like the school board is trying to help keep it up or whatever. They want it to fall down if you ask me. 'Cause it's a black school, and they really don't care.

Here, Nini's sentiments closely resonated with Anderson's position. Because of “Cumming,” black schools in the South “had virtually no hope of sustaining an equal protection claim, and consequently, both the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and the ‘equal, but separate’ rule of Plessy were meaningless” (Anderson, 1988, p. 192). Consequently, black schools often received less monetary funding or any other forms of district support. For that reason, more often than not, black learners' facilities and textbook materials were either obsolete or hand-me-down leftovers from their neighboring segregated white schools. Supposedly, Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 was issued to relinquish such visible disparities in the schooling of United States pupils. However, since the Brown decision, new mechanisms have been employed to facilitate continued educational disparities for schools predominantly housed with African American learners (Shujaa, 1996). Commenting on the physical conditions of her school, student/ historian Bashira declared:

**You know nobody cares about us back here. When it rains the breezeway drips with water. And, in the winter it be cold and in the summer we be hot.**

**During the 1930s, as a consequence of World War II, more economic opportunities were made available to African Americans and women in urban centers. Many African Americans left their rural surroundings and migrated to urban areas. During this era, Anderson (1988) found that, more than ever before, African American high schools sprang up all over both northern and southern regions of the United States to house rather than educate idle African American youth. However, before the Brown decision was issued, many African Americans and Euro-Americans lived together in urban centers, but dwelled in segregated communities. Yet, after the Brown decision many Euro-Americans began taking their children out of public schools and/or moving to the suburbs (West, 1993), leaving the city to the ghettoed.<sup>115</sup> When Euro-Americans left urban areas so, too, did the bulk of school districts' monetary resources. For most school districts, their greatest monetary support is derived from property taxes (Hudgins, H.C. And Vacca, R., 1979/1991). This means that those who own land in a respective district, county, or parish pay taxes to support its public schools. However, when landowners leave the city to non-landowners, economic disparities gravely affect a school's ability to obtain necessary resources to provide adequate facilities and resources to educate its learners (Kozol, 1991). Hence, in spite of the Brown decision,**

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**<sup>115</sup> By ghettoed I mean improvised blacks. Woodson in Green (1930) found that, in lieu of economic advancements of African Americans during the 1930's, African Americans still received lower wages than their European counterparts and were laid off more frequently.**

McKinley, and many urban schools across the nation, remain "raggedly."

*When You Listen to Jazz Played by Jazz Musicians, You are Listening to the Great African American Tradition. (Batiste in Simpson et al., 1999)<sup>116</sup>*

Yet over and above its physical and economic unfortunate incidents, something strange yet emancipating happens behind predominantly black schools' doors. It is something so peculiar yet so profound that, in days of old, African American students would go to bed just after dusk so that they could wake early enough to walk to school and arrive there by seven thirty or eight o'clock in the morning. Avis Baker White, a graduate of McKinley's class of 1943, remembered:

We had to go to bed at night at 7:30 or 8:00 because many of us had to walk to school. McKinley was the only school; people came from all over--Denham Springs, across the river, Port Allen, all kinds of places. McKinley was the only school near or far. <sup>117</sup>

After emancipation, blacks were consumed with the desire for school (Anderson, 1988; Davis, 1983). Schooling, or "book learning," was important because . . .

it was a desire prompted by curiosity born of compulsory ignorance, to know and to test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the

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<sup>116</sup> Please see appendix E.

<sup>117</sup> Mrs. Avis Baker White's re'co-lec'tion was taken from McKinley Oral History Project, Summer 1995, housed at the Harry T. Williams Center for Oral History, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.



highway of Emancipation and low, steep, and rugged but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life. (Dubois, 1903/1992, p. 6)

The attributes of education were not just part of the enslaved and freed black folks' conversation. At the same time, former enslavers also proclaimed that "learning spoiled the best nigger in the world" (Davis, 1983, p.100).

Consequently, slavery was replaced with sharecroppers and tenant farmers; the Emancipation Proclamation was replaced with black codes, and generations of formerly enslaved and freed blacks--as well as their descendants--were denied an education (Franklin and Moss, 1994).

Likewise, writing about the educational experiences of many southern African Americans, Linda Perkins (1981) states:

There were scattered opportunities for both free Blacks and slaves to become literate prior to the 1830's throughout the nation. However, education for Blacks was viewed as dangerous after the fiery appeal of David Walker of 1829 and the 1830 slave revolt of Nat Turner, both literate men. After the 1830's all the southern states instituted laws prohibiting the education of Blacks. (p. 16)

Consequently, despite marginal conditions, education for blacks was seen as a privilege. According to Ed Mae Butler, a graduate of McKinley's class of 1932, the mere chance for African Americans to attend school made their classrooms sacred. Other McKinley graduates from the classes of 1928 and 1972 had this to say:

[W]e had excellent teachers. Excellent teachers. Loyal, dedicated, and their main objective was to see that we were good students. They inspired us. All the teachers. You just always wanted to be like your teacher. We loved our teachers to the extent that just to touch them was something to us. You just wanted to touch a teacher.--Isobel Herson

We had a lot of older teachers here who were from the old school. There was not a lot of playing with them. They just sort of knuckled down and said, 'Hey, this what we have to do!' And they prepared us well. Class was serious. There wasn't time for things that weren't academic. --Ed Pratt<sup>118</sup>

Scholars bell hooks (1994) in Teaching to Transgress and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) in The Dream Keepers, support Butler's, Herson's, and Pratt's reminiscences about the "good old days" of segregated schooling. For hooks and Ladson-Billings, during the era of segregation, education was a site for political resistance. Black schools were locations for crafting counter-hegemonic discourses. Lessons were used to disrupt notions of genetic inferiority and intellectual deficiency. Specifically, hooks (1994) notes:

Almost all our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers--black folks who used our "minds." We learned early that our devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counterhegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization. (p. 2)

*Be the Best You Can Be and Stay Real to Your Self and You Will Do Just Fine in This World--Cornell Moore*

In their self-ethnographies, students/historians likewise shared their "rec'-o-lec'ions" of McKinley serving as a site for political resistance. For them, pockets of disruption happened through teachers who cared and whose intregal craft had molded McKinley's great and most outstanding graduates.

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<sup>118</sup> Recollections from Ms. Ed Mae Butler, Ms. Isobel Herson, and Mr. Ed Pratt were gleaned from the McKinley Oral History Project, Summer 1995, housed at the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

According to students/historians, teachers that cared expected nothing less than their sheer brilliance. Student/historian Bashira stated:

Well, I have had teachers that haven't taken stuff off me. They makes sure my work is done. And, if it's not done to the best of my ability they'll give it back and make me do it again. Even if they've got to knock me upside the head and tell me, "Girl don't do that." But, you know I don't mind because that's a teacher that cares.

Reminiscing about her chemistry class, student/historian Dhambizoa reflected:

Like Mr. L, he's a teacher that cares. The whole hour he talks, talks, talks and teach, teach, teach. And, he's always paying attention to us. When he notices that we are confused, he'll be like, "[Dee], you need help?" He'll call you up to the desk and go through the problem step by step until he knows that you got it.

Osyimwese contended that a teacher who cares was not only concerned with your classroom activity but was also interested in what you do after class, and in your home and in your community. Sharing his reflection on a teacher who cared, he maintained:

Mrs. Z not only look at you for what you do in school. She's concerned with what you do in your community and how you treat your family. And, if your grades go down, she's going to talk with you but if she's not getting through to you, she's going to make sure you do your work. She will talk to your parents and tell the principal if she has to, to make sure you do your worklike you suppose to.

Because hidden in its secret compartments are teachers who care, I hold that, though situated in segregated space, a space that aims to inform students of and indoctrinate students with messages of inferiority, McKinley students/historians were able to usurp these claims and experience real education. They asserted:

It makes me feel good to know that I'll be graduating from the first black high school in Louisiana. But like some people say, it won't hit me 'til I'm graduated and gone. [Then] it will be like, hey, I went to that school if they say something 'bout it years from now, I'll be like I attended it too. I graduated from [McKinley].  
--Dhambizoa.

It's hard, you know, still for blacks today to try to make it. Especially in the United States of America. But it's very uplifting and encouraging to know that I go to a school like McKinley. Because I saw my brother graduate in 1996, and he's going to become a civil engineer. It's encouraging to see, you know, a lot of black kids, trying to graduate from a high school that is, was, the first black high school in South Baton Rouge and trying to be something in life. --Akua.

McKinley is an all right school being that so many great and famous people came from here and it's still here. And the fact that my father and I was able to come to this school, and hopefully, I will be able to finish too from here.--Osyimwese.

Among McKinley's outstanding graduates are State Senator Cleo Fields; Judge John Michael Guidry, head football coach at Southern University in Baton Rouge; Pete Richardson; local Channel Nine reporter Isaiah Carey; local news anchor Sylvia Witherspoon; former organizer of the Negro Baseball League, Buck Jackson; and internationally known blues guitarist, Tabby Thomas. In my view, each of these noteworthy McKinleyans is are important primarily because each serves to disrupt claims that "students are dumb because they are black and they go to McKinley."

In addition to these McKinley greats, Osyimwese mentioned another remarkable McKinley graduate--his father. Although this particular graduate may not be world renowned, he is equally influential in casting McKinley as a site to politically resist notions that suggest its inferiority simply because it is a

black school. Other students/historians joined Osymwese in recognizing McKinley as a superb school because it had successfully educated members of their family. Students/historians shared:

Everybody's parents went here. I feel good knowing that I go here. I feel kind of privileged. --Shafiiqa.

My dad went here and my mom went here. That was in 1978 and 1982. Both graduated. My mom graduated with honors, she was the valedictorian. --Butu

McKinley has a lot of heritage behind it. It's a good school even though the exterior of it don't look too hot. A lot of my family came here, so I came here. McKinley is a good school.--Nini

In lieu of messages students/historians received that because it's a black school, then the students are dumb, McKinley--and, most importantly, its graduates--served as a site to refute such claims. McKinley's impact as a source for political resistance is so powerful that, although some students/historians had internalized tinges of black hatred, their solution was not to leave McKinley, but to get others to come and know the reality of its greatness. Through students/historians self-ethnographies, I learned that though racism engulfed much of their thinking today, its power to shape and mold students' thinking and actions was debilitated behind many McKinley classroom doors. Further, I came to understand that what students/historians had come to learn in our oral history project as real education was inspired through memory as history. Reflecting on discussions with their interviewees about African American music, students came to know oral history as real education by navigating knowing and teasing out the significance of

**yesterday's memories today. In so doing, students/historians disrupted and  
problematized racist social hierarchies that attempted to refute their  
intellectual greatness and thus, I found, experienced real education.**

## **Chapter 7**

### **“Out the Book to Create a Book”**

Student/historian Nini shared that our oral history project was unlike any history class she had ever taken, because in our African American Studies class “we created the book. You see, we was out the book to create a book.” Additionally, she asserted:

In other classes, we have books sitting in front of you this thick [extends hands and arms wide to represent their enormous books] and you know you not going to get finished with it. Why do they give us those big ole thick books that nobody reads or like to carry around. Instead of trying to make it where you want to learn, they just give you anything just to say that they taught you something.

Other students/historians echoed Nini’s sentiments, regarding the irrelevance of their textbooks. Specifically, Dhambizoa, Butu, and Osyimwese, held:

Usually, when you in a class, you just reading from the book, so you don’t really get the feel of it as when you hear somebody speaking about it. It kinda hits you more.--Dhambizoa

I enjoyed learning through oral history cause it allowed me to get more knowledge about things, that I probably wouldn’t know if I hadn’t taken this class. You know real stuff. Stuff that’s not recited in textbooks.--Butu

[Oral history] showed that you could learn things without having to always be in a book.--Osyimwese

Presented with disconnected facts and irrelevant material, students/historians claimed that their book learning was often void of meaning. However, in contradiction to their textbooks’ more static ways of knowing, in our oral history project students/historians were writers of their own textbooks and

constructions of knowledge. It also revisits students'/historians' classroom experience with oral history as real education. In the first section, entitled "Doing All the Work," I highlight students'/historians' comments on constructing knowing. The second section, entitled "We Wanted to Do It," informs readers from students'/historians' perspectives of the importance of interest in developing curriculum couched in the experience of its knower. In the third section, "You Teach It Differently," I borrow tenets of John Dewey's (1902/1990) notion of the child and curriculum and examine interest as a venue for promoting real education. The final section is entitled "We All in This Together." In this section, students'/historians problematize individualization engulfing most traditional classroom settings and explain how working together enabled them to understand the importance of collective responsibility.

### **"Doing All the Work"**

In oral history we ended up doing all the work. We came up with the topic that we studied, we researched the topic and conducted interviews. We came up with a book and we learned.--Daraja

In our oral history project, students'/historians guided their learning process and educative development. Sharing how this endeavor was made possible, student/historian Daraja noted: "In orai history we decided on our own topics, we chose who we would interview, and we were responsible for writing our book." Additionally, student/ historian Akua concluded, "in oral history you go yourself and you do the research." Further, commenting on what doing oral history research meant for her, she maintained:



Oral history is basically the history where you don't open up a regular textbook and start writing down answers and having to remember stuff. Rather, in oral history, you go yourself and you do research and you find out about the subject that you're working on and you know you can do [study] anything you want to do.

In addition to expressing excitement about the opportunity to "find out about a subject" and "do anything," Akua alluded to banishing regurgitation and recitation in the classroom. Comparing oral history to other classes, she held that unlike other history classes "where you writing down answers and having to remember stuff," in oral history, "you go yourself and you do the research." Refuting more traditional teaching approaches, Akua admonished what Paulo Freire (1970/1997) terms "banking concepts of education" (p. 53). Freire asserted that in banking concepts of education, education "becomes an act of depositing [information], in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 53). In contradiction to banking concepts, Akua assessed that oral history as real education disrupts depositing and embraces *conscientizacao* (Freire, 1970/1997, p. 55).<sup>119</sup> Theorist, educator, intellectual, and activist bell hooks (1994) argues that *conscientizacao* recognizes education as a "practice of freedom" (p. 13); that is, pedagogy which engages critical awareness and consciousness. Resonating with Akua's sentiments and excitement about oral history, hooks asserts that education as a practice of freedom constructs knowledge in a "field in which all labor" (p. 14). In other words, learning is not some dispensable commodity. Rather, education is a

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<sup>119</sup> Freire (1970/1997) holds that *conscientizacao* is the development of critical consciousness.

process in which all are involved in discovering knowing. Hence, as Akua indicates, students are not told what to know; rather, they are given license to search knowing for themselves.

Other students/historians likewise supported seeking knowing and constructing truth as a venue for inspiring real education. Dhambizoa maintained that, as she searched and constructed knowing, comments made by informants prompted more questioning. She claimed:

Oral history is just straightforward, person to person, listening to their ideas and interpreting them and creating new ideas with them. You hear something they saying. You say, okay, I ain't never heard that before. So, you get to really thinking on it. You might even research more on what they saying by asking other people what they think about it. You learn more and more.

Similar to Jim Garrison's (1997) contention that the aim of education is to make more meaning, Dhambizoa asserts that oral history prompts more questioning.<sup>120</sup> Student/historian Butu, like Dhambizoa, also revealed that he enjoyed oral history, "because the more you do the more you know, and the more you know the more you learn." Additionally, student/historian Bayyina asserted:

[Oral history] makes you out of a completely nosy person. And you find out a lot of information that's untold.

In each of their discussions, students/historians explained that oral history is not a definitive form of history but, rather, a recursive process. By

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<sup>120</sup> There is a very old expression that Dr. Bill Doll, one of my graduate professors, would often state in class: "Questioning is the piety of thought." Here, Dhambizoa's comment reminds me of Dr. Doll's expression as she maintains that oral history(ies) prompts more questioning.

this I mean, learning through oral history was an ongoing process of uncovering multiple perspectives. In other words, students/historians understood that once a narrative was shared, this did not necessarily make a saga truth. Rather, they held that the more you question or “be nosy,” the more truths you could discover. In this light, oral history and, most importantly, learning history came to be seen as an ongoing process where knowing is likened to an inquisitive learner with endless questions.

### **Your Grandmother Made History**

Bashira too noted oral history’s more investigative stance, but in contrast to more fixed positions on knowing history in traditional educational practices. According to Bashira, what was unique about oral history was that the knowledge students/historians used to construct their his- and her-stories was comprised of knowing(s) by people they knew. She stated:

You would never know that your grandmother or your grandmother’s friends made history. That’s what I mean, in oral history, because we are the authors of the books, who we might be studying and writing about may very well be your grandmother. And, you can go to a book and read about ... oh this person is my grandmother, you know.

In her statement, Bashira mentioned the power afforded to one writing one’s own story and determining whose voices will be included and excluded in knowing history. Further, she asserted that in order for students to be aware of the fluidity of history in making historical figures, students must be mindful of the history makers in their everyday lives. She contended:

In oral history you have to really go out and find out what it is you need to know, I mean it’s not always going to be in a book. You

have to go out and expose yourself to what's going on. You never know. You go interview someone, you all be sitting around talking, and their buddy might be your grandmother or somebody.

According to Bashira, oral history as real education disrupted static notions of whose knowledge was worth knowing when knowledge was used to expose learners to "what's going on." For example, in their oral history projects, students/historians interviewed members of their own families and other lay persons in their community. Through their interviews, students/historians discovered that they did not have to look for renowned historical figures to render historical knowledge. All they had to do was look next door in the mirror.<sup>121</sup> In my view, the above comments reflect why students/historians wanted to participate in our oral history project. In the next section, I explicate why students/historians wanted to know, as Bashira mentioned: "what [was] going on."

### **"We Wanted to Do It"**

In our class we did the work because we wanted to do it, I think even though you were our teacher and you had the power of the pen. It wasn't "oh I got to pass this class, because if I would have failed the F would have went on my transcript but I still would have graduated." I am pretty sure that all the rest of them [other students/historians] would have graduated too--Nini

In the above quote, what Nini explains is why students/historians willingly participated in our oral history project. According to her, students/ historians "did it" because they were interested. Though I was their teacher and, as Nini noted, "had the power of the pen," it was not my grading power that motivated

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<sup>121</sup> Also see Parks in King and Osborne (1997).

students'/historians' participation. Students/historians became involved because in our project they learned things that they wanted to know. By losing themselves in a quest to understand the history of African American music in their South Baton Rouge community and by yielding their knowing to the voices of those whom they believed possessed knowledge worth knowing, students/historians uncovered truths that stimulated their interest and simultaneously recovered themselves. In keeping with this philosophy, in Democracy and Education, John Dewey (1916/1966) held that an interested person both loses herself or himself in some affair and, at the same time, finds themselves. In other words, through interest, a person is roused to discover. However, as a person searches to satisfy his or her interest, curiosity is fulfilled by knowing possessed by another entity. For example, as students/historians searched to find out about the history of music in their community, the answers to their query were based on the interpretations of others. As students/historians searched for answers, they yielded while expanding what they knew about their community's music and simultaneously lost and recovered themselves. Provoked by the desire of interest, Butu commented:

I was interested in the class because there was something I really wanted to learn about. If it's something you want to do, you'll do it.

Here, Butu maintains that when a person is interested in knowing about a person or phenomena, their will to know impels exploration. In his chapter "Interest and Discipline" in Democracy and Education, Dewey (1916/1966) provides some very poignant perspectives on the role of interest in education.

For the purpose of analyzing this section, I rely on Dewey's theory to understand and convey a relationship between interest and student motivation.<sup>122</sup>

According to John Dewey (1916/1966), "Interest measures--or rather is--the depth of the grip which the foreseen end has upon one in moving one to act for its realization" (p. 130). Nini asserted that teachers can determine if a student is interested by their actions. She remarked:

Okay. When students really want to do something, you [teachers] can tell because they [students] are like really having fun. They [Students] ask you [teacher] exactly what it is that they [students] going to do and they [students] don't try to dodge work. Miss a day and they [a students will] come back and be like what did we do? They [interested students] be wanting to do their work.

Dewey (1916/1966) explicated a rationale for interest by explaining the difference between a spectator and a participator. He maintained that a participant is one who is involved in what's going on while a spectator is indifferent to what is going on. Dewey believed that what encourages the involvement of a participator is "solicitude, anxiety concerning future consequences, and a tendency to act to assure better, and avert worse, consequence" (pp. 124-125). Moreover, Dewey was convinced that an innate tendency for one to avert undesired ends was also a motivating force stimulating interest. Illuminating this perspective, students/historians expressed reasons why they were interested in our oral history project.

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<sup>122</sup> I have chosen to rely on Dewey's theory of the role of interest in education because Dewey was the first to prompt my thinking in this way. Septima Clarke (1990); Sylvia Ashton Warner (1963); and Jane Addams [in Munro] also advocated this theory.

We really got into it, mainly because it is African American studies. --Butu

I was interested in the class because we didn't use books, really. I mean we read and stuff like that. But, I mean we didn't use like school books, put it that way. We would use like black author books and stuff like that. We read what was interesting to us. It was interesting to us because it was about what we was trying to learn about African American music.--Bayyina

In other classes that I have had in the past we sit down, talk and have class discussion. But, we took another turn in this class. We like went out and did this. We went out and did research, walked our community and talked to people in and from our community to learn about music. In other classes we do a little of this and a little of that. Like we interviewed people who did what we wanted to do when we graduated from high school. But, in here we went beyond that to try to figure out things. We wrote a book. --Bashira

Students/historians were interested because the stories that they historicized concerned them and their community. Consequently, if their stories were not made public and left unknown, then their sagas and their lives would forever remain omitted from the tales of history. Seen in this light, the outcome of interest operated in duality. Propelling knowing, interest likewise instigated discipline. Hence, Dewey (1916/1966) noted that interest and discipline are intimately connected. Dewey professed that "interest is requisite for excut[ing] persistence" (pp. 129-130). Accordingly, students/historians related:

We were very proud of what we did because we put a lot of hard work and effort into this book. It's not just something that we played with, it was something that we took very seriously.--Daraja

I looked at this class as a challenge. I mean, it's like a mind thing. If you want to learn and you're interested in something, then you'll learn. You know, you'll do whatever.--Bayyina

When I first saw the class, I said well African American Studies, it's going to be an easy class so I went on and joined. Seemed like it was going to be easy at first but it wasn't an easy class. It really depended on whether I wanted to get involved. And I ended up wanting to get involved and I enjoyed it. --Butu

I hold, like students/historians, that the process of an oral history project can be enjoyable when situated in students' interest. However, if ever there was a period when I feared students/ historians would dodge work, it was during the transcribing and editing phase of creating their book. Though I was elated that through editing and transcribing students/historians were acquiring writing and word perfect skills, they expressed what they disliked most about oral history:

Transcribing and typing. Listening to all that stuff and typing it word for word. I couldn't stand it. [Laughs.]

When we got to the typing part of it, when we was transcribing it was kind of tiresome doing a lot of typing and stuff. But when you got over that part, then it [was] okay.

The transcribing [and] transcribing. You had to sit there listening to everything people say. Having to stop, rewind, stop, rewind again and just typing out word for word what they said.

Type what they said on the computer and then patch it up. Print them out. Check over them and find any mistakes and words and run on sentences and anything like that. And then retype.

Bayyina shared that despite the hard work of transcribing and editing, their work did not seem quite so troublesome, since students/historians chose the topics they were discussing. She commented:

It was hard work but because we chose it wasn't so bad. It was like... we wanted to do it. And when you are doing stuff that you want to do, you're more interested in it.



In the next section, I focus on the role instruction plays in encouraging student involvement.

### **“You Teach It Different”**

Oral history was different for me' cause I never would have thought about writing a book when it said African American Studies. I thought it was like a regular class. You not the only teacher that teach African American Studies, but you teach it different ant that's what makes it better.--Butu

In Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks (1994) reflects on what Butu came to identify as “teaching different.” hooks (1994), reminiscing on her own teaching practices, shares:

I entered the classrooms with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer. Education as the practice of freedom was continually undetermined by professors who were actively hostile to the notion of student participation. (p. 14)

According to students/historians, their interest in subject matter was heightened by my interest. Shafiiqa states: “We were excited about learning because you were excited about us [students/historians]. It [our learning environment] was like you trusted us and you let us do [discover] what we wanted to know.” John Dewey (1916/1966) argues: “When material has to be made interesting, it signifies that as presented, it lacks connection with purposes and present power, or that if the connection be there, it is not perceived” (p.127). Since interest motivates students to learn, Dewey held that interest was the means of a teacher’s desired end. For Dewey, interest was the mediator between the present powers of pupils in their initial stages of discovering and understanding a new concept and the aims of their teachers

to have the concept conveyed. Furthering Dewey's discussion, students/historians held that as the teacher, by my connecting curriculum content to their lived experiences, their interest was not only the gauge, but also a moving force between their desire to know and my will to share in the process of knowing. As Butu stated, "You not the only teacher that teach African American Studies, but you teach it different." Additionally, unlike his experiences with other teachers in traditional educational environments, Butu disclosed that what he enjoyed most in our project was that spoken memories connected learning to his lived experiences. Butu held that this connection allowed him to acquire new knowledge more easily. Particularly, he stated:

I enjoyed learning through oral history 'cause it allowed me to get more knowledge about things that I probably wouldn't know if I hadn't taken this class. You know, real stuff. Stuff that's not recited in textbooks. In oral history, learning is straight. It wasn't no sophisticated words or whatever. It was words that I'm used to every day, Ebonic and stuff. I can understand them better than I can understand the words in books.

Osyimwese likewise shared that among its many attributes, his experience with our oral history project at McKinley readily connected knowing to his lived experiences. Commenting on the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott, information he acquired through one of his interviews, he asserted:

School is so boring. They just tell you what they want you to know. Nobody ever told me about no bus boycott, in South Baton Rouge where I stay. They would never tell us that. They tell you stuff about slavery, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, but nobody ever told me 'bout no bus boycott in South Baton Rouge.

Bashira also complained about the disconnectedness of materials in more traditional classroom settings, where teachers often disregard students'

interest and participation. She praised our class project because I, as teacher, allowed students to determine what should be constituted as knowing in their curricula content. Particularly, Bashira spoke of students' desire to learn "stuff we want to know about" rather than "the same thing over and over." She argued:

Okay, well first of all, you don't hear too many students saying okay, let's go research our community. Kids do the same thing over and over, you know trying to find out more about Martin Luther King, which is mostly what everybody knows and stuff about Harriet Tubman, and the slaves from plantations. But what about learning stuff we want to know about. Like the influence of music in our community, you know, stuff like that.

In addition, Bashira noted African American figures and their experiences most highlighted in her social studies curricula as mere icons bearing no significance to her lived experiences. For Bashira, what interested her most about our project was the opportunity to understand the music of her local community and historicize these narratives. Through community studies, oral history as real education enabled Bashira's desire to be realized.

Like Butu, Osyimwese, and Bashira, as well as for many American students, school is a place where facts found in the curriculum serve no useful purpose in their everyday lives. This lack of personal relevance inhibits meaningful learning and real educative possibilities (Dewey, 1938/1966; Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a). Learning is made more complicated, especially for urban African American learners, by curriculum content that bears little significance to their home environment (Delpit, 1995; Gordon, 1995; Hale, 1994; Shujaa, 1995). Textbooks feature that "in 1492 Christopher

Columbus sailed the ocean blue," but the relevance of this information connects in no way to students' lived experiences. Because book learning does not encompass learning objectives that are reflective of students' home environments, its content with "empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of [teaching and learning] to become lifeless and petrified" (Freire, 1970, p. 52).<sup>123</sup>

### **Doing in the Context of Learning**

Like many oral history projects, our project at McKinley enabled students/historians to learn basic skills in the context of doing their project. In other words, as students/historians documented the biographies of their local community musicians, they also acquired and developed critical thinking, problem-solving, and writing skills as well as their overall creative capacity. In this light, students/ historians Shafiiqa and Bashira viewed their involvement with our oral history project as unique. Shafiiqa believed that her experience in oral history made her schooling special because she and her classmates were authors of their own text. She stated:

This was the first class I ever created a book in. I consider it unique, it's something different I've never done before, but I would love to do it again.

Akua held that writing their book was not only unique, but because she was able to express her thoughts more by writing, she found that oral history crossed disciplinary boundaries and bestowed grammar and writing skills she missed in English III. She noted:

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<sup>123</sup> Also see Ashton-Warner, 1963; Dewey, 1902/1990; Nieto, 1996; Paley, 1979.

Because we get to express our thoughts on paper more in this class than I normally do in English III, oral history helped me to be able to express my own thoughts and ideas more by writing.

Students/historians Daraja and Akua also claimed that they reaped unexpected educational benefits. Daraja expressed excitement when he noticed that the writing skills he had acquired through oral history had also enhanced his ability to understand the mechanics of Standard English. Reflecting on an event when he was able to help correct his school newspaper editor's mistakes, Daraja shared:

We have this one girl who is the editor of the school newspaper. I was reading over one of her articles and kept showing her places that were wrong. This was writing stuff that I would have never thought about looking at before taking this class. And, she was like, yeah that's right. So, I guess it made me feel kinda brilliant.

Nini and Daraja asserted that during their educational process of historicizing spoken memories, they not only actively acquired historical knowledge but found learning was more authentic<sup>124</sup> because they were not burdened with taking tests. They held:

It wasn't like a test, where you could just cheat off somebody. It's stuff you happen to know from your experience of interviewing somebody. Nobody was with you except for the person that was there. It's something you have to be there to see. --Daraja

With books and taking tests you may do good in class or whatever but some people when it comes to tests, they just can't take tests. When you being taught like this, the teacher actually sees what you know by what you do. Now a test don't determine that. --Nini

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<sup>124</sup> By "authentic" I mean lessons that are applicable to real world situations, what Woodson (1933) called real education and what I refer to as real learning.

**Oral history is not something that you can cheat off of. Its something that you have to know cause its not a test or anything like that. You have to know it so that you can have your part to contribute to the whole. Because everybody is responsible for their own portion of the project. If you don't apply yourself to complete your portion then the whole book would still be incomplete without certain portion of the project. It's like making a salad or something but you don't have the lettuce or something. Then your salad is not complete. So, in oral history, you have to do your part so that everything will be together. --Daraja**

**Both Daraja and Nini came to understand that what students/historians did was used to assess what students/historians knew. They also recognized that assessment was not only given by me as their teacher, but rather, as Daraja realized, assessment was also self-imposed through a sense of collective responsibility. Equating the project to a salad, Daraja found that if a person or a group contributing to the project failed to provide their contribution then the entire project was in jeopardy. This sense of collective responsibility resonated throughout students'/historians' experience with oral history as real education. Hence, the next section is devoted to students/historians and their experiences with working together.**

### **"We All in This Together"**

**What I really enjoyed most about the class is that it brought a lot of black young people to an understanding that you have to work with each other to make it in this world. You can't do anything by yourself. We all need each other. Everybody is equal and we all must work together.--Dhambizoa**

**Here, Dhambizoa articulated that the one critical element students/historians realized in their exploration of oral history as real education was working together. Though initially resisting the communal requirements I set for our**

class, Bayyina likewise recognized that through oral history as real education she learned a different way of getting a job or project done. She noted:

We helped each other transcribe their interviews. Instead of looking at the person and be like ... (I did it at first)... be looking at the people, well they ain't doing nothing so I ain't doing nothing for them, but you had us to come together and finish it together. Like when one person wasn't there we had to take their slack and they would catch our slack when we were not there. That way everybody's getting the job done and we can thank everybody for finishing.

In my view, Bayyina's resistance was encouraged by conditioning. So often in more traditional settings, individualization is mandated. However, in my view, individualization is a farce and suggests solitude. Individualization encourages people to see themselves like scattered islands disconnected from the life forces that bind them together. For example, though islands are separated, they are connected by the life force of the ocean, like people are connected by the life force of breath. Though often championed for stimulating creativity and competition, individualization, I contend, undermines nature and the natural occurrence of human relationships bounded by breath, the life force that keeps us forever meshed through past experiences and future hopes and aspirations. In this light, it was important to me, as their learning facilitator, that students/historians experience oral history as real education by realizing that the good for one must be the good for all. Reflecting on this class mandate, Daraja shared:

The way that everybody chipped in on everybody else's part. Like the transcribing you just wasn't doing you own, you were doing something for everybody. --Daraja

Joyce E. King (1994), in her article "The Purpose of Schooling African American Children," maintains that individualism is inherent in Euro-American cultural tradition while collectivity is indicative of African American cultural knowledge. Referencing Mbiti (1970), Nobles (1985) and White (1987), King (1994) observed:

In contrast to the individualism inherent in Euro-American cultural traditions, African American cultural knowledge is grounded in a legacy of collective sociocultural identity, communalism and reciprocal relations. (p. 32)

In keeping with King's observation, while sharing his experiences with writing the book, Daraja held that "the book was more enjoyable, 'cause I did not do it by myself." On the other hand, Daraja maintained that he found classes which harbor individualization to be unenjoyable. Though some may argue that Daraja's dislike for a more traditional setting is because it encourages laziness and/or cheating, I claim that in a collective setting fraudulence and slothfulness are neither acceptable nor desired.

Initially, in his conversation on working together, student/historian Osyimwese expressed discontent about working together because he felt that if he was doing someone else's work, then others must not have been doing their own. However, by the end of his statement Osyimwese replaced his "I" with "we" and noted that "we finished the book":

At first, it was too much work on me and they sitting there not doing nothing. But, then it came out better because we finished the book and now I feel good that we finished. Helping each other out worked out better in the long run.--Osyimwese

Despite various mishaps and because students/historians wanted to have



their voices heard and their names remembered in history, each willingly made his or her contributions toward the creation of their book.

Mirroring democratic education in collective classrooms, students' unique voices and experiences were encouraged and necessary to create novelty of thoughts for a common good (Dewey, 1916/1966). Moreover, asserting that the collective is inherent in the individual, King (1994) maintains, "One's identity is simultaneously personal and collective just as one's individuality, as a particular expression of one's personal uniqueness, expresses the unity and diversity of humanity" (p. 32). Concurring with this thinking, Nini stated what working together meant:

Just help out your classmate. Say some day somebody won't show up. Instead of letting that person with the book sit there and wait for the person to come, you can just go ahead and finish it up for them. That way the book was finished sooner.

Here, Nini reinforced the I/We concept that was inherent in their collective responsibility towards each other and their personal commitment to have the book completed. For in finishing the book, students/historians realized that they, too, were finishing the book for themselves.

In the *Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990//1998a) held that: "Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better" (p. 29). When Woodson's definition is applied as a classroom creed, I hold that real education reconfigures traditional notions of schooling by disrupting dichotomized student/teacher relationships and leveling the playing field so that all are actively involved in the creation of knowing. Further, and in

**accordance with students'/historians' firmly held contentions that in order to make students' learning experiences better, real education means that educators must begin with students' interests and use their interests as a premise for further learning and development.**

## Chapter 8

### **"Do You Remember Me"**

*Oh honey  
Why you got to be so mean  
Don't you remember me?  
Aaw baby  
You and me you and me you and me  
We built sand castles in the Serengeti  
Don't you remember me?  
You splashed my face with Nile water  
Daughter of the Diaspora you named me Claim me  
Do you remember me?  
(Harris, A. and Pelzer, K., 2000)*

Jill Scott (2000), in her debut sound track "Do You Remember," shares with her audience a memory lapse experienced by someone who names and claims her. Ironically, as this individual constructs and reconfigures Scott's being, he or she simultaneously forgets to remember her. Scott's lyrics remind me of modern educators who have forgotten urban African American students. According to Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a), modern schooling is an educational milieu that centers the voices of dominant beliefs and does not remember the voices of those situated in the margins of knowing. Yet, in spite of modern education's biased stance on whose knowledge is worth knowing and whose experiences count, modern education forces all of its pupils to digest what I have come to term the tales of the S.W.A.M. M.P. (supremacist, white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, male, Protestants) as truth. Scott's agitation with her author mimics my indignation with dominant discourses that rely on tales of the S.W.A.M.M.P and modern education to label students as

at-risk without giving consideration to how larger structural conditions are central to creating at-risk learners. Specifically, here, I am referring to educators who name and claim students as at-risk while exonerating educational practices, that mis-educate urban African American learners.

Searching for alternative perspectives and looking for real education, Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth has been written as a call to remember urban African American students forgotten in dominate discourses. Specifically, using the voices of ten urban African American youths, this research examined how oral history can be used to inspire real education and shifts reproach from individual students and their home environments to the larger curricular conditions that have aided in creating them-- at-risk.

Divided into five sections, this chapter has been written to state the findings of this research. Section one is entitled "Hoodwinked: Lynching in the Schoolroom." This segment discusses my initial discovery that traditional curriculum in our current educational settings distorts meaning of self and history as well as attempts to "lynch" pupils. The second section, entitled "Rediscovering the Past: An Act of Decolonialization," explicates my second finding that traditional curricula's distortion of self and history leads students to seek multiple claims to truth and resist colonialization. The third segment is entitled "Meaningful Lessons: The Freedom of Choice." This section expresses my third and final lesson that for learning to be meaningful and education to be worthwhile students must participate in choosing who and what they will study. The fourth section, "Curricular Implication: Toward

Tomorrow," examines those curriculum implications I found in this study to reveal possibilities and alternative approaches for teaching social studies. This section is followed by a brief synopsis. In this summary, I give my final thoughts regarding Woodson, *Sankofa*, and oral history. Additionally, I leave questions for future multi-cultural educators in hopes of stimulating future conversations regarding real education for historically marginalized learners.

### **Hoodwinked: Lynching in the Schoolroom**

*[T]here would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a, p. 3)*

Through listening to students/historians and engaging with them during our classroom sessions, my first finding revealed that behind classroom doors African American students' perceptions of self and history are being lynched. This hanging occurs with partial truths and skewed notions of reality.

Student/historian Dhambizoa argued:

Regular history books don't tell you [much about black people] like I did not know where Ebonics came from. I didn't know that Africans were the first to domesticate sheep, goats, cows and were the first to discover iron. They don't teach you that in regular history.

Here, Dhambizoa asserts that traditional history books omit accomplishments and endeavors of people of African descent. Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) likewise held during the 1930s that modern education esteemed and transmitted Anglo-centric deeds while negating delivery of accomplishments of those who did not wholly identify with an Anglo-Saxon ancestral heritage. Woodson argues that, left without knowing the accomplishments and deeds of those who do not share the racial signification

of whiteness, students are taught and come to believe that every material invented or noteworthy thought created were designed by one divine Anglo race. He maintained that these teachings were a colonializing tactic, which operated to castrate students, both black and white, from knowing self and appreciating others. Furthering his argument, Woodson held that colonialists' lessons were also very instrumental in governing the thoughts and controlling the actions of black/white relations. According to Woodson (and I too have come to agree), by silencing marginalized perspectives, colonialist lessons foster bigotry and make binary and antagonistic black/white positionalities. These binaries oftentimes create hostile relationships, making the "lynching" of historically marginalized knowledge and knowers both possible and acceptable. Lamenting colonialist lynching in the classroom, in The Mis-Education of the Negro, Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) argues:

It is strange, then, that the friends of truth and the promoters of freedom have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it. This crusade is much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom. Why not exploit, enslave, or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as "inferior"? (p. 3)

In textbooks where most African Americans are portrayed as either slaves, scabs, or laborers, students are not only informed of African Americans' presence in the United States but are also notified of African Americans' place in America's social hierarchy. Disdain for the African American, found to occupy the lower rungs of society, becomes not only natural but also an apparatus used to assure social control (Pinar, 2001).

Speaking specifically about the physical lynching of black males in the South, in "Strange Fruit," William Pinar (2001) discusses the white man's desire for the black male's body, both sexually and as a site for colonial conquest. Pinar is poignant in sharing the historicity which made lynching a presumed necessary evil. Particularly, he reveals:

Because the sex and gender systems, not to mention black sexual attacks on white women (however imaginary), is not separable from popular attitudes regarding power, society, and nationhood, violations of the race/sex barrier were experienced by many whites, many white men, as blows against the very foundations of society. Not only white women were at stake, "civilization" was at stake. While whites worried, naked black men burned at the stake. (p. 68)

Pinar's theoretical posture holds that the lynching of black men was regarded as an act of retribution to protect the virginity of white women and the purity of the nation. Likewise, I contend that the metaphysical lynching of historically marginalized learners is pursued to protect the virtue of colonialization and seeks to keep the status quo firmly intact. In Democracy and Education (1916/1966), John Dewey argues:

[A] society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social change without introducing disorder (p. 99)

For Dewey, this education was acquired by distributing particular cultural dispositions. He writes:

Beings who are born not only unaware of but quite indifferent to the aims and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap. (p. 3)

Further, he holds that "unless pains are taken to see that genuine and

thorough transmission takes place, the most civilized nations will relapse into barbarism and then into savagery" (pp. 3-4). Dewey's posture validates colonialist knowing. He maintains that the purpose of education is to either transmit the knowledge of the civilized or regress to the knowledge of the savage. In so doing, he positions knowing in binary contradiction. Hence, schooling and history become notions that validate the voices of some while relegating the voices of others to the margins. These skewed lessons are realized by historically marginalized learners as obstructions of truths. Speaking specifically about distorted lessons learned in American history, Nini argued:

American history is just about white people. It's white people who did things in America. Just because black people are from Africa, they brought us over here, it doesn't mean that they did not do anything in America. They don't teach any of that in American history.

For those schooled in American history, this statement may seem ludicrous. To think that students today are not informed of the accomplishments of those like Jan Matzeliger<sup>125</sup> or Charles R. Drew<sup>126</sup> may appear absurd. Yet, the question for me has become: Why is this information so often not taught?

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<sup>125</sup> In 1883 Jan Matzeliger, an African American, received a patent for the shoe-lasting machine, which launched the mass production of shoes.

<sup>126</sup> In 1904 Charles R. Drew originated blood plasma banks.



## **Inferior**

As students/historians conducted research on spirituals and blues to fulfill a portion of their responsibility for their oral history project,<sup>127</sup> we engaged in numerous conversations about the history of Africans and African Americans in America. Often, we talked about slavery. As we discussed enslavement, I would share with students/historians my-stories which focused on our enslaved fore-parents' gifts to society-at-large. These conversations, in my view, were intended to elevate students' consciousness and create within them admiration for their ancestors and themselves. Though many students/historians seemed to appreciate my-stories, what stood in the forefront of most of their minds, during our interview sessions, was the way enslavement engulfed so much of what was communally understood as American history. Students/historians argued:

I get tired of hearing about that particular part of history [slavery], and not focusing on what we have done, you know, that's been like real great achievements instead of "Y'all were slaves," and "Y'all had to work out in the fields."--Shafiiqa

I'm like tired of people, like, they're not really downin' us, but they're talking about how bad we were treated [during enslavement] or whatever. I mean give us credit. We have blacks who have invented things. You know what I'm saying? But you never hear people talking about that. It's like, it's always the negative part of being black--Bashira

Here, students/historians expressed their agitation about two things. One, they were bothered by always being reminded of slavery in their textbooks.

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<sup>127</sup> The topic of the students/historian oral history project was African American music.

And two, they were upset that history textbooks or historians rarely give attention to other aspects of African Americans' experiences. Yet, when I first began talking with students/historians about this era of African and African American history, they resisted. Throwing me "the hand," they informed me that they "didn't wanna go there." Initially, I did not understand why students/historians seemed so repulsed by these conversations about enslavement. However, now some two years removed from our experience together, I am better able to comprehend their frustration. Seeing what I did not see then, as students/historians contested slavery sagas, they were also fighting the status quo.

### **Reinscribing the Status Quo**

In primarily giving attention to "slavery,"<sup>128</sup> history textbooks likewise seek to teach and reinscribe social hierarchies.<sup>129</sup> Given no counter-narratives, students of history are covertly taught that in the history of American society, it is white people's place to dominate black people and it is black people's responsibility to willingly comply. Hence, hearing and learning continuously "Slavery this and slavery that," students/historians, like Shafiiqa, were informed of not only the hierarchial power relationship between master and slave in the past, but also of the hierarchial power relationship between

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<sup>128</sup> I place special emphasis on slavery here because I am referring to an institution most often talked about in American history. In my view, this period of American history in most texts give little attention to any insurrection or rebellion. In so doing, I hold that those who were enslaved are pictured as if they willingly complied with their servitude.

<sup>129</sup> Many theorists talk about the use of hidden curriculums to maintain existing social orders. See Apple (1990); Freire (1971); Gramsci (1975); McLaren (1994).

and slave in the past, but also of the hierarchial power relationship between white people and black people<sup>130</sup> in the present. Yet, the contradiction of this narrative is in the question that it prompted students to ask-- Why did our grandparents let white people rule over them, when I'm unwilling to be ruled by anyone? This question, a reflection of racialized homogenization,<sup>131</sup> in my view, caused students to weather ongoing tales of African Americans' willing subordination and defy schooling's attempt to lynch who they are and their history.

What McKinley's 1998-1999 students/historians demanded in their lessons was less knowledge/histories that substantiated their servitude and disempowerment and more knowledge/histories that affirmed their greatness.

One student/historian stated:

Black people should know where they came from. And know that black people did a lot and have changed a lot. Most history classes don't teach you that.--Nini

Over and over, students/historians expressed that there is simply more to the history of African American people than is being taught to them in American history classes. Yet, without this knowing, students were left with lies that named, claimed, and made their lynching possible.

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<sup>130</sup>See Paulo Freire (1970/1997) and his theoretical conversation of lesson learned in order to maintain oppressed/oppressor relationships. Also see Amilcar Cabral (1970) "Return to the Source."

<sup>131</sup> In using this expression, racialized homogenization, I am referring to students'/historians' kindred spirits bound through representations of race. I am not suggesting here that this identity/subjugation claimed in totality who they are but that their racial identity was shared with each other as well as their ancestors.

## **Rediscovering the Past: An Act of Decolonialization**

My second discovery while participating with students/historians in our oral history project was that students yearn for multiple claims to truth and often resist the colonialization of their minds. According to Signithia Fordham (1996), this resistance takes many forms, from truancy to outright belligerency. However, Beverly Tatum (1997) and Jerome Bruner (1996) reported that resistance also manifested as students gravitated to subversive cultures that were seen by youths to represent black culture. This representation, according to Tatum and Bruner, is understood by many young people in contradiction to what is communally accepted as white middle-class culture. I would like to add here that students' resistance was color blind with regard to their messenger/teacher. Oftentimes, when they felt that I, an African American teacher, was dispensing "white folk's" knowledge or telling them what they should know, they also resisted me.

In one classroom discussion Bayyina stated:

Ms. LaVada, you know sometimes you be teaching and it's all good. But, when you start using big words and talking funny, you be sounding wack.

The occasions when I found myself "talking funny" and "using big words" were moments when my middle-class, collegiate background crept into my conversations with students/historians, seeking to inform and not teach students/ historians new information.<sup>132</sup> Often, in these moments, students/

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<sup>132</sup> This information can be found in my journal notes. Here, I discuss as well what I had come to understand as the difference between teaching and informing. In every reflection, each time I found my self informing students/historians of something, I was really attempting to

historians would simply ignore me. Having found repulsive my use of the master's language, they wanted to shut me out. Though I was mindful that my elitist voice collided with the desired knowing of my students/historians. I nonetheless was persistent with my agenda.

For me, my use of "big words" and "talking funny" was a way to inform students, through context, the words and politics of dominant mainstream society. My intent was not to have students conform to the beliefs systems of mainstream America, but rather, that students/historians be equipped with tools to bring down the master's house. I wanted students/historians to be mindful of Adrienne Rich's observation: "This [Standard English] is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you" (quoted in hooks, 1994, p. 167). Equipped with the oppressor's language, for use at their discretion, I argue that the possibility for students to decide for themselves who and what they want to be, as well as to be heard by those who seek to shut them out, becomes just a little more plausible. I use the word plausible because in a society still fraught with racism, sexism, and classism, knowing the master's language still does not guarantee opportunity or equitable education.

### **Black Like Me**

Speaking specifically about racism and its influence on African American youths, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) maintains that African American learners' identity formation is often found evolving in response to

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tell them what they should know about being marginalized in a society dominated by SWAMMPs. However, on occasions where teaching took place, information was acquired through discovery and questioning, and students, though mindful of tales of the SWAMMPs, were prompters of these discussions.

the teachings of and by a white supremacist society. Tatum argues that, usually around the age of twelve, African American young people become conscious of racism. She holds that this awareness causes African American young people to affiliate with groups that offer solace against overt and covert manifestations of racism and enables them to form oppositional identities. Relative to Tatum's theory, student/historian Assata mentioned in conversation her repulsion for people who were black but "acted white." When I asked Assata what she meant, she responded:

They black like us, and have our skin color but like they be acting white. Trying to be the teachers pet and acting all siddy like.

Though speaking particularly of African American students, Assata's aversion really was about racism. In an earlier interview, Assata said that because of our skin color, whites hold blacks with reproach. Therefore, for a black person to "act white," they, too, must hold our skin color with reproach and harbor dislike for themselves. Though what Assata was explaining is internalized racism, what makes her statement complicated, if not outright frightening, is that what many students come to understand as "acting white" does not necessarily operate in contradiction to being black. In other words, speaking "proper" (sic) or using big words does not mean that an African American has resigned his or her blackness.

However, taught in and through schools, that whites are proper and that white folks' language governs African Americans' speech, students/historians "characterized" school as a white place and, in opposition to racism, resisted its teaching. Ironically, though, as many students/historians resisted

schooling, they simultaneously practiced its instructions. By this I mean, left knowing only a few accomplishments and contributions of their racial and classed kin, students came to believe that opposing whiteness meant resonating with often bastardized constructions of blackness (Riggs, 1987).

Reflecting this tone while speaking candidly about students'/historians' casual use of the word "nigger," Bayyina maintained:

Some black people have this attitude like they don't care. They be calling each other nigger or Negro or whatever. It's because they don't know. They don't know what's really going on or what has happened or whatever. They don't know their history.

Yet, students/historians argued that oral history as real education provided venues for conscious alternative perspectives to emerge. Butu stated:

Like some people when they first came into this class. Well, some people changed over time. The more we learned about ourselves, the less we appreciated the word [nigger]. Like Osayimwese, he use to be man N [nigger] this and N [nigger] that. I don't say it [nigger] now. I hardly ever hear him saying it either.

Further, Daraja maintained:

In oral history, I learned that history is more deeper, like where I come from, I learned that it's [history] more deeper than what I thought. I ain't just no black born in America or nothing like that. All the things that everybody went through before we did get here. How they made it and how smart they was. They mighta been illiterate, but they did have some kind of sense to build drums and whatever. They had to be pretty smart to do stuff like that or even think like that.

Drawing on memories and sagas of contradictions that are often excluded from traditional textbooks, I found that oral history as real education illuminated narratives silenced by dominant historical discourse and revealed

truth(s) by complicating widely held assumptions on knowing whiteness, and blackness. In so doing, oral history as real education enabled students/historians to navigate knowing and complicate truths gleaned from a colonialist perspective. Further, I found that as students/historians navigated knowing and complicated truths, they experienced what Franz Fanon (1963) called decolonialization. Fanon, in The Wretched of the Earth , argued that decolonialization is "the replacing of a certain species of men with another species of men" (p. 35). This new species of men and women are created as thoughts are used to release the strongholds of colonialization and enable men and women to truly think for themselves. Moreover, I contend that decolonialization is also the first step in realizing a just and equitable society. Like opening Pandora's box, decolonialization releases alternative perspectives and clouds salient binaries, contingent on the historical constructions of race, class, and gender. These are binaries used for centuries to divide people, govern their bodies and dispositions, and maintain the existing social order.<sup>133</sup> Recognized in this light, I have come to believe that disrupting knowing and decolonializing minds is essential for those of us who are visionaries and adamant supporters of democracy in our existing multi-cultural society.

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<sup>133</sup> Although I am mindful and agree with Foucault's (in Ransom, 1997 ) stance on the circulatory nature of power, in using the phrase "existing social order," I am nonetheless concerned with binary and oftentimes hierarchical relationships that still exist between people of color and whites, men and women, the middle-classed and poor.



### **Meaningful Lessons: The Freedom of Choice**

Through my investigation of oral history as real education, my third finding concluded that for learning to be meaningful and education worthwhile, students must participate in choosing who and what they will study. Early in our project, I realized the significance of students/historians deciding on their topic of study. However, what I did not realize was the importance of students/historians selecting the sources of their oral history data collection. Rather, relying on lessons learned from past experiences with oral history as pedagogy, I gathered informants for them. And, in so doing, I repeated the ways of a colonialist paradigm that students deplored. I denied students/historians the right to choose whose knowledge was worth knowing and whose experiences count. Passively, by not showing up for their scheduled interviews, students/historians resisted and I learned my third lesson.

In both community-based oral history projects that I worked with at McKinley High School, before developing and implementing this research, none was based on students' choice. Although the projects documented the her/histories of students' South Baton Rouge community, from my perspective, students participating in oral history had no input on what would be studied. Instead, students reported on the first day of the project and were informed by us--teachers, directors, facilitators--what they were going to research. Rather than the students/historians, a community liaison decided on who would be interviewed and located the interviewees. Through my experience with oral

history as real education, I have come to realize that our decision making process, which denied student participants the right to choose who and what they would study, reflected what Paulo Freire (1971/1997) terms banking methods in education.<sup>134</sup> Sadly, I am sure that informing students who and what they will study is not a practice isolated to the McKinley oral history project. Initially, as stated previously, I too found myself repeating this mistake. However, noting students' resistance, I learned that this mistake was one that should not be repeated if students of oral history were to experience real education. Through oral history as real education, I have found that when students are told what to do, they lack interest. Yet, I argue that interest enables the manifestation of significance. Hence, without interest there is no significance and without significance there is no history. I am sure that this may seem like a slippery slope or an illogical type of reasoning. However, based on my experience in the classroom, when students are made to do any activity, they either ignore the activity or the activity becomes merely a task to be rewarded with payments of treats or good grades. On the other hand, this research has shown me that when students decide their study, payment is not rendered through external rewards like prizes and grades. Rather, rewards

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<sup>134</sup> In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire (1971) refers to banking techniques in education as the process of depositing information into students. Although in the project information was not deposited directly, in my view, by telling students what they had to study and determining who would provide them with information, we inadvertently deposited information into students. We informed them what they should know and who would construct this knowledge.

are experienced intrinsically as students discover and uncover how a significance of a trace relates to their current situation.

Additionally, in each of the projects in which I have participated, as students collected their research or analyzed their data, there was no juxtaposition of their collected spoken memories with tales found in traditional historical texts. There was no problematizing grand narratives or static assumptions governing the “truth” nicely inserted in their history books. In my view, without questioning traditional assumptions about truth/history, students’ collected spoken memories were unable to serve as sites for political resistance or real education.

In order for oral history as pedagogy to be realized as real education, projects must be premised on students having the freedom of choice. Additionally, teachers/facilitators must be willing and ready to provide students with the opportunity to navigate knowing and complicate truth. I argue that without oral history projects being rooted in students’ choice or used to politically resist dominant assumptions, then oral history is simply a means of making traditional notions of history a little more interesting by adding a few distinct voices. Without disrupting or questioning traditional historical paradigms of what counts as knowledge/history, I find that spoken memories are no more than marginalized asides of dominant historical discourse which articulate what counts as history and who should construct what is known. Here, the role of the teacher is very important. Like a revolutionary pedagogue in Freire’s (1971/1997) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, teachers are

facilitators and problem-posers. They are responsible for facilitating activities and posing real and meaningful questions so that a constant negotiation of reflection and action is taking place.

Another very interesting facet that I learned as a consequence of my involvement with students/historians in oral history as real education was that the influence of oral history in w/riting history was not confined only to the stories students/historians documented in their project. Rather, students/historians informed me that oral history as real education also happened through the stories that they were told about McKinley and the sagas shared by Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a), in The Mis-Education of the Negro.

In The Mis-Education of the Negro, Carter G. Woodson taught me if you can control a man's action and the way he thinks, then you can enslave his mind. You lead him to believe that he has to think a certain way in order to survive. When really it's up to him. He's in charge of his own destiny. He has the power to determine what he wants to become. It's not up to the next man to tell him what he needs to do. --Akua

McKinley has a lot of heritage behind it. It's a good school even though the exterior of it don't look too hot. A lot of great people graduated from McKinley like Senator Cleo Fields and Judge John Michael Guidry. And a lot of my family came here, so I came here. McKinley is a good school. --Nini

Through our interview discussions students/historians reminded me that oral history was a fluid activity in African American culture; thus, McKinley and Woodson were also seen as models of oral history as real education.

### **Curriculum Implications: Toward Tomorrow**

My two initial findings concerning this research informed me that oral history as real education usurps classroom lynching and licenses students to

experience decolonialization by rediscovering silenced narratives of the past. Additionally, I learned through oral history as real education that the spark that kindles learners to the curriculum is found in student choice and the significance of a trace. Combined, these lessons helped to inform me how students/historians experienced oral history as real education. Moreover, I learned how curriculum as a mechanism of control is mis-educative.

### **“Curriculum and Concepts of Control”: A Historical Note**

In Curriculum and Concepts of Control, William E. Doll, Jr. (1998), assisted by Al Alcazar, historically situates the origins of curriculum as a mechanism of control. Tracing curriculum back to the Protestant reformation, Doll and Alcazar maintain:

The rise of Protestantism with its individualism, commercialism, with its formation of a middle class, and scientism with its new methodology brought a new sense to education, a sense interested and committed to simplicity and method. (p. 303)

Geneva Smitherman (1975), in her essay “Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom,” posits a connection between the rise of a middle class and the necessity to acquire knowledge quickly and easily. Smitherman, like Doll and Alcazar (1998), asserts that this call for simplicity was answered through methods and stimulated by a techno-rationality prompted by a budding middle-class’s desire for speed, efficiency, and the epistemologies of their elites. As the middleclass rose to power, Smitherman (1975) argues, they wanted to shed their peasantry markers to resemble as much as possible the aristocracy of their time. Yet, in order for this to happen, the middle class decided they needed to learn the ways of being and knowing of those whom

they had deemed superior. Furthermore, during this era, education and knowledge were no longer something to be searched and discovered (Doll, 1998). Rather, in this time period, education and knowledge evolved into a dispensable commodity to create and pass on the ways of knowing and being gleaned from an aristocratic perspective (Smitherman, 1975). Hence, in 1576, Peter Ramus, "one of two great methodizers" (Doll, 1998, p. 303), conjured up curriculum <sup>135</sup> to "furnish students with a universal skeleton key which if properly applied, could unlock any of the arts or sciences" (Hamilton in Doll, 1998, p. 304), while Johann Comenius<sup>136</sup>, the other great methodizer, gave instruction--the how-to of running the course (Doll, 1998). In other words, Ramus established what students needed to know and Comenius informed teachers how they could teach it quickly and easily. Educated through and with curriculum and instruction, the middle class desire for a quick, dispensable knowing of the elite was met. Yet, what went unnoticed were universal truths that were also created through Ramus's constitution of curriculum and Comenius's declaration on instruction. The result was that these universal truths silenced the ways of knowing and being possessed by countless others, and most particularly, those whose experiences were often deemed marginal.

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<sup>135</sup> For a more detailed discussion, please see Doll (in Pinar, 1998).

<sup>136</sup> See Comenius (1657/1896).

## **The Keys That Lock Me Out**

Today many teachers still follow the guides of Ramus and Comenius. Teaching a particular view of the world in ways that seek to inscribe knowledge, they disregard the knowing of multiple perspectives and distort learners' ability to know themselves and others. Hence, teaching a tragic parody, many educators never uncover the mystery of why so many urban African American students deplore schooling. The travesty of curriculum and instruction is its quick and easy bestowal of another's knowledge and constructed truths. This mockery was formed, in my view, from the inception of curriculum and instruction. In its early days, curriculum and instruction erased the very existence of those who were seeking re-constitution. Knowing and vicariously becoming the elite middle class named and claimed who they wanted to be and wilfully subordinated their knowing as well as their existence to the aims and desires of an elite class. To accomplish this end, knowledge was segmented and prioritized. Centering one way of knowing and being meant marginalizing others. Polarizing knowledge and governing truth, this elitist perspective evolved as universal truth and, to this day, determines what teachers teach and what students learn in most classrooms. This travesty is tragic, particularly as it relates to the schooling of historically marginalized students. Taught in schools with pieces of knowing, that is, history(ies)/mysteries that illuminate the intelligence of white middle-class males while silencing the intelligence of others, students are simultaneously informed and misinformed about who they *be* with lies that distort their being

and becoming. I maintain, like Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) and William Pinar (1992b), that as these notions inform racial identity, they operate to obscure what it means to be a black or a white learner in America today. Specifically, William Pinar (1992b) writes:

**We say, we are what we know. As well, we are what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves-- our history, our culture-- is distorted by deletions and denials, then our identity-- as individuals, as Americans--is distorted. (p. 232)**

Here, Pinar argues that partial truths operate to inform students of incomplete notions of identity. In other words, through deletions, knowing one's identity becomes distorted through "lies my teacher told me" (Loewan, 1995).

However, through this research, I have come not only to realize that this misinformation/mis-education aborts everyone's being and becoming, but that through research I now have the means to imagine a new social studies. In this new social studies, knowing is not a neat, linear package confined to dominant perspectives. Rather, in this space, knowing social studies is a cyclical, non-linear activity that embraces the fluidity of past, present, and future as now.

Though initially I argued, like many supporters of oral history (Hoopes, 1979; Lummis, 1988; Portelli, 1991; Thompson, 1978/1988) that memory is history, this research has enabled me to see that neither memory nor history exist outside an understanding of a temporal moment. Seen in this light, there is no history nor memory; there is only now. This now reaches back, takes, and reconstructs moments in yesterday to better understand a present.



With this insight, I have come to imagine a new social studies caught in the fluidity of nowness. A temporal mutable study, this social studies accepts multiple claims to truth and navigates the boundaries of the past and present while moving toward a future. Additionally, these varied and pluralistic forms of truth are not used to elevate the epistemologies of some while subordinating the perspectives of others. But, here on this new social studies plane, knowing is caught in an abbreviated space where respect and tolerance for difference is essential, for "no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood" (Doll in Pinar, 1995, p.450).

### **Real Education, *Sankofa*, and Oral History as Pedagogy: A Summary**

Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth has revealed that real education, *Sankofa*, and oral history as pedagogy in many ways are synonymous. As a philosophy, each require that students go back to fetch what they need to better understand the present. In so doing, real education, *Sankofa*, and oral history are links to a complementary whole and offer endless possibilities for creating sites for political resistance. Real education used the her/histographies of great African American people and events to forefront sagas that contradicted dominant racist assumptions on what it meant to know or be black or white in America. In so doing, real education sought to render alternative claims to truth to enable learners to envision a different social reality. Yet, in objectifying history through a few great members of our race, real education, from Woodson's theoretical frame, silenced the voices of many

learners who carry the signification of black. It is here in real education's limitation that oral history restores its possibilities. In oral history, learners choose who and what they need to know. Most often this choice or this desire to know leads them to search a historical trace that bears significance in the moment. When these narratives serve to contradict traditional assumptions on truth and problematize knowing, like Woodson's contention of real education, oral history serves as a site for political resistance. In praxis and as philosophical lessons, both Woodson's notion of real education and oral history mimic the *Akan* people of Ghana, West Africa, expression, *Sankofa*. By this I mean, in oral history as real education, students/historians went back to the past to fetch what they needed to better understand their current situations (Willis, 1998). Consequently, Daraja concluded:

[Oral history] is basically about learning where you come from and where we need to be heading. Just gives you a lot of information on blacks and how certain blacks had to sacrifice they self so they could make it better for us today. How we need to take heed to that and add on to it, instead of looking at our situations and not do anything about it.

Additionally, Osayimwese summarized:

In oral history, what people shared helps you to realize what was happening then is happening now. The stuff they was going through then, we going through it now. And, in order to [understand] our situation better we looked at what happen back then to try to learn stuff about today.

The connections between Sankofa and decolonization are very salient<sup>137</sup>. As

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<sup>137</sup> Please see chapter 2 pp. 56-62, if further reiteration is needed.

a learner goes back and searches for alternative truths that resonate with their current situations, what evolves is an act of thinking for one's self and searching for significance of a trace that can only be defined by the person who is seeking knowing. In this light, as students/historians went back and searched for perspectives omitted in their textbook, I found that they also participated in decolonization.

**Questions:**

Although the last section has been written as a summary, I would like to leave this text with questions. I write these queries in hopes of continuing this conversation going on behalf of historically marginalized learners and real education.

1. Does all education have to enculturate, acculturate, dominate, impose, and exclude? If so, why?
2. How do we recover histories of the oppressed, raced, gendered, and classed histories without creating dissension, romanticizing the past, or appearing naively racist or sexist?
3. How do we give up our fears of the other long enough to embrace the possibilities for social change?
4. How do we practicalize teaching environments where different cultural epistemologies are recovered, discovered, respected, valued, and learned?

In this study, my babies, urban African American learners, and my philosophical lessons, real education, Sankofa, and oral history were meshed to create a powerful dissertation. At different periods, this work ignited in me

feelings of elation, fear, anger, and finally, hope. When I first began to immerse myself in this research, I was excited. However, as I began to grapple with this study, I often found myself faced with feelings of anger and fear. I was afraid and angry because, as I began to uncover the role of colonialization in the mis-education of historically marginalized learners, on many occasions I found that I, too, was guilty of naming and claiming knowing for students and not with students. However, after completing this work, I find that my fear and anger have been replaced with hope. I hope that these findings will cause educators to take a closer look at what we teach, and how we teach as well as whose knowledge is worth knowing and whose experiences count. And, just maybe, with care-ful<sup>138</sup> examinations, in our new millennium all students in America's schools will experience real education.

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<sup>138</sup> My use of care-ful here is used to signify a care filled embrace of multiplicity and difference.

## **Epilogue**

### **W/Righting Oral History(ies)**

*"It was not just mine. It was everybody's."*

**November 11, 2000**

*Oh shoot, I forgot to ask students/historians--what they would like for their pseudonyms to be. A couple of them have left for college and others have moved from South Baton Rouge. But I need to give my students/historians names to protect their identities. Yet, a name, in so many ways, creates an identity. So what should I name them? If I call them Sarah, John, or David, a Euro-centric paradigm will frame their identities. Do I want this? Jeez, this is hard. A person's name is so important. Some people believe that people become their names (Zawawi, 1993). So to be named is to become. If I give them European names, will that make them then European? Or, will naming them Euro-centric names, simply ignore their African ancestry? Humph, I really hate either/or's. I guess one way to grapple through this dilemma is to remain mindful that with European names and their black skin, I would have a both/and that adequately reflects many African Americans' forced physical and psychological hybridity in the Americas. But, do I want a Black Holocaust to be the source of their naming? No, I don't think so? All I know is that I can't just name the students/historians any ole thang. I know, I know they already have names, but not for the reader. The*

*reader knows nothing about the students/historians; therefore, the students'/historians' names should and could inform the reader of who the students/historians are. Their names can be used to frame or situate meanings of students'/historians' perspectives and attitudes. If I can do this, then their naming will serve as a personification of the students/historians. Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. But, in this personification, should I address heritage and origin? And if so, how? How do I name their heritage when they are neither European nor African and yet they are both African and European? Perhaps, I should name them College Bound, Professor Bright, and Sojourner Truth. But, the trickery of labeling couched in the English language will still bind them to a European paradigm.*

*Pam, my officemate, confidante, peer editor, and just all-around friend, suggested that I use African names. However, just like I believe that the trickery of the English language will bind them to a Euro perspective, so too I worry that naming them African names will bind them to an African paradigm. But is this a bad idea? They are neither African nor European, and yet they are both African and European. At the very least, by using African names, I can situate the students/historians not only through naming but also through locating space for the problematic construction of African Americans' being in the Americas. By employing African names, I am resurrecting an African portion of our/their African/European identity which was*

*massacred to create us, African Americans, as an enslaved population. Yeah, I will give them African names. But, their labeling will also be names that will identify their personalities, goals, and/or ambitions. Yeah, this is what I will do. By "bahati"(luck), I think I've got it!*

As the oral historian responsible for situating the context of our project, I felt that it was imperative for me to remain mindful of a very insightful statement made by student/historian Daraja. In a conversation about his experience with oral history as real education, he noted that a part of the ethos of our project was an atmosphere of shared responsibility and accountability. Specifically, referencing our project, he stated, "It was not just mine. It was everybody's." This statement prompted me to question, whose research is it? By this I mean, who is voiced, who is silenced, and in the end whose knowing informs the study?

My question likewise reflects the concerns of many authors found in Daniel McLaughlin and William G. Tierney's (1993) edited text, Naming Silenced Lives: Personal Narratives and the Process of Educational Change. Particularly, in "I and Thou: Method, Voice, and Roles in Research with the Silenced," Yvonna S. Lincoln (1993) argues:

The "crisis of representation" in ethnography directly addresses the question of silence, posing as it does the issue of how we create adequate and authentic accounts of those we study."  
(p. 32)

Like myself, Lincoln and others hold that authenticity is acquired through a dialogical relationship between the researcher and the researched. However,

what writers do not poignantly address are the limitations for reciprocity in qualitative research. I have found that each time a researcher claims voice by writing an informant's experience, she or he is caught in the paradox of "naming silenced lives" (McLaughlin and Tierney's, 1993, p.2) Hence, claiming voice, like naming, was among the many ethical dilemmas I faced as a qualitative researcher. This epilogue is written as a critique of qualitative research. Though postmodern qualitative researchers recognize such research as rendering voice (McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993), I argue that being caught in the nasty web of voice and representation is unavoidable. Inevitably, in many ways, qualitative research silences informants and resigns their beings to marginal spaces.

For example, I was the teacher/ researcher/dissertation writer of our project and, like students/historians, I was also a student/historian and a learner/ teacher. Hence, constantly, consistently, and intentionally, our (students'/historians' and my teacher/ researcher/learner) learning environment was made possible through a reciprocal understanding of what it means to know and whose knowledge is worth knowing. However, as I wrote this dissertation, I was one of many and I found myself faced with various challenges. Among these obstacles were, how do I w/right about our experiences together without silencing students/historians voices? Yet, each time I attempted to take an egalitarian posture and articulated who we were, what we did, and how/where we did it, the more I realized that I took an authoritative stance. Since I wrote about our experiences, I was the authority.



Synthesizing students'/historians' story, with my voice, I nonetheless named our experience (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Krathwohl, 1993).

In the Handbook of Qualitative Research, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) explain that qualitative research "involves the use and collection of a variety of empirical materials....that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 3). David Krathwohl (1993), in Methods of Educational and Social Science Research: An Integrated Approach, notes that qualitative researchers "work in natural situations and seek explanations that provide the best understanding of what was observed" (p.740). As an African American urban educator interested in "educative" (Dewey, 1938/1963) approaches that seek to encourage "real education" (Woodson, 1933/1990/1998a) with urban African American learners, qualitative research provided me with a means to observe students actively engaged in an alternative educational approach.

Listening to students tell their stories about their experiences with an educative approach that used oral history as real education, I heard semantics rich with meaning and verbal utterances couched in history that distinctively represented our voice as African American speakers. Fortunately, because of the intersubjective nature of qualitative research, and despite being possibly admonished by my academic peers, I could use our voice to tell their story (Van Maanen, 1995).

The chapter begins with part one, entitled "On Naming." Here, I draw on Malcolm X's (1967/1990) text On Afro-American History. Specifically, I

summarize from his perspective the naming dilemma of African Americans. Part two, "Voice as Presentation," discusses the highly complex and political tool termed "voice." In this section, I give a brief historical sketch of African American voice commonly referred to as Ebonics. Lastly, in part three, "Degradation or Validation: Complicating Representation," I theoretically approach some ethical issues involved in naming voice, particularly African Americans' voice, in qualitative research.

### **On Naming**

*It is the naming of a child that first begins the establishment of a child's identity.  
(Osuntoki, 1977/1991, p. 2)*

Naming is a highly complicated undertaking. Often, names are selected to reflect a desire or the best intentions that a parent has for her/his child (Zawawi, 1993). However, for enslaved Africans in colonialized America, naming was one of many tools used to sever enslaved Africans' ties from their homeland and their heritage while reconfiguring their identities.

In On Afro-American History, Malcolm X (1967/1990) argues that after highly civilized and erudite Africans were brought to the Americas, they were made into dense, docile subjects through the art of naming. The responsibility of transforming these learned men and women into compliant, illiterate servants was left in the hands of the most repugnant person in the slave

trafficking process, the slave maker<sup>139</sup>. With grave reproach, Malcolm<sup>140</sup> holds that slave makers were more horrific and demented than either slave captors or slave masters. According to Malcolm, slave makers used mechanisms of control to force enslaved Africans to succumb to the will of those who would profit most from their ignorance.

One control mechanism was fear. Malcolm referenced Frazier (1949/2001), Franklin (1956/1988), Dumond (1961), and Spears (1960) as writers who revealed how fear was instilled in enslaved Africans using some of the most brutal tactics known to humankind. Moreover, he (1967/1990) cites occasions when slave makers would animalistically amputate African men's arms and legs as well as butcher pregnant African women to place fear in the hearts and minds of other enslaved Africans and their posterity. Plainly, Malcolm (1967/1990) states:

[T]he slave maker used to take a pregnant woman, a Black woman, and make her watch as her man would be tortured and put to death. One of those slave makers had trees that he planted in positions where he would bend them and tie them, and then tie the hand of a Black man to one, a hand to the other, and his legs to two more, and he'd cut the rope. And when he'd cut the rope, the tree would snap up and pull the arm of the Black man right out of his socket, pull him up into four different parts .... And they made the pregnant

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<sup>139</sup> According to Malcolm (1967/1990), slave makers were found in the Caribbean Islands. They were responsible for turning African people into "slaves" before being shipped to the United States.

<sup>140</sup> Malcolm X's name presents one of the complicated contradictions African Americans face in naming. In theoretical writing, the last name of an intellectual is used, but Malcolm X has no last name. As African Americans, members of the Nation of Islam drop their surnames because they believe these last names are "slave" names and link them to their enslaver. And, not knowing one's last name or family name, X represents that void. In this light I will use Malcolm, his first and only name. See also Lomax (1963).

**Black women stand there and watch as they did it, so that all this grief and fear that they felt would go right into that baby, that Black baby that was yet to be born. It would be born afraid, born with fear in it .... And, they used to take a Black woman who would be pregnant and tie her up by her toes, let her be hanging head down, and they would take a knife and cut her stomach open, let that Black unborn child fall out, and then stomp its head in the ground. (pp. 46-47)**

**Fear was not the only mechanism of control employed by crazed slave makers to mold compliant enslaved Africans. According to Malcolm, enslaved Africans were made dumb by taking away their language and their name. He claimed, "A man who can't talk, what do they call him? A dummy. Once your language is gone, you are a dummy" (p. 47). I call this process dummying. Enslaved Africans were dummied by being brutally beaten for speaking in their native language (Williams, 1975).**

**Moreover, dummying was also carried out by laws which mandated that offspring of enslaved African women be removed from their mothers immediately following their births. By separating a young child from its mother, Malcolm contends, enslaved African mothers would not be able to teach their children what they knew about themselves, their past, or their heritage. Each child of an enslaved African mother would, consequently, grow up "in complete darkness, knowing nothing about the land where it came from or the people that it came from" (Malcolm, 1967/1990, p. 48). The slave maker, as well as those who shared his subjectivities--S.W.A.M.M.P's<sup>141</sup> was able to dummy children of African descent by instilling in them knowledge**

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**141 By this I mean white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, male, and Protestant.**

which substantiated the slave maker's fortitude, valor, and centrality (Johnson, 1990). In so doing, the slave maker renamed African children's identities. Whisking them from their mothers, slave makers replaced enslaved African children's names from *Sekou* (Fighter), *Modeira* (Teacher), and *Mariana* (Gift of God) to Dick, Jane, or Alice. Slave makers informed enslaved African children that their skin was a curse and renamed their history to teach them that they were descendants of savages and heathens (Woodson, 1933/1998).

Lamenting on these events, Chief Osuntoki (1977/1991) remarks:

Our people, for one great era of silence, lived in terrible bondage.  
It was then that we were forced to take on foreign names and to  
be weakened in the defense of our heritage. (p. 3)

However, as an act to reclaim our past and to reconstruct our identities, many people of African descent are choosing to exercise African names.

Tayari kwa Salaam argues that "naming has been one of the means by which African Americans have responded to and resisted a history of oppression and exploitation" (2000, p. 2). I maintain that this act of reclamation through African naming is also a reclamation of history and identity. Accordingly, Sharifa Zawawi (1993) likewise holds that the word "name" defines identity. Zawawi claims that "a name is an expression by which a person, a thing, or a place is mentioned or identified" (p. 4). In this light, naming calls forth an identity of another entity, like the Dogon people of Mali's expression *Nommo*, "the power of the word to shape reality" (Flowers, 1999, p. 154). And, as Chief Osuntoki (1977/1991) asserts, "[I]t is the naming of a child that first begins the

establishment of a child's identity" (p. 2). Thus, once an entity is named, it becomes. Or, does it?

### **Naming: A Paradox of Being and Becoming**

Naming can be used to label history and claim origin. However, I argue that naming is a discursive practice and, as an agent of meaning making, is a very complicated endeavor. Many assumptions about naming suggest that once an entity or an individual is named so too is its being and becoming (Flowers, 1999; Osuntoki, 1977/1991; Zawawi, 1993). Yet, I further contend that the fluidity of being and becoming belies naming's more apparent static nature. For once an entity is named, a being is not absolutely constituted. The act of a being making meaning is always in flux, always becoming, simultaneously influenced by both the named and the namer of a meaning making process. Consequently, I assert that a name's meaning is couched in an epistemological knowing of a namer. Therefore, what I may name an entity may not be the same name nestled in another's experiential frame. For example, someone might name Joanna as bad. For me, based on my experiential understanding, as a member of a southern African American community, naming Joanna as bad may mean that Joanna is good<sup>142</sup>. However, if someone who is unfamiliar with my cultural context witnesses naming Joanna as bad, he or she may think that Joanna is an evil or vindictive

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<sup>142</sup> Some would argue, referencing Foucault, that this is reversibility discourse. But, I maintain that this paradoxical naming is one of many Africanisms adopted in African American culture and can be traced to the naming practices of the Mandigo people in West Africa. For further explanation, please see Geneva Smitherman (1986) Talkin' and Testifyin': The Language of Black America.

person. Hence, couched in the possibilities of this inherent paradox--to be named simultaneously employs renaming. Moreover, in spite of naming's inherent paradox, with grave and deliberate intentions, I chose each student's/historian's name. My hope is that my students'/historians' names would evoke in the readers a desire to embrace both their historicity and their origin as readers make meaning or signify students'/historians' voice.

### **Voice as Presentation**

*To open your mouth is to put your business in the street. You have confessed your parents, your youth, your salary, your self-esteem, and alas, your future.  
(Baldwin in Perry and Delpit, 1998, p.86)*

For me, language and voice are interdependent and relational. Language is the skeleton of an identity, while voice is its flesh. As a person speaks, he or she defines her/himself and her/his immediate environment. Yet, in politicized climates, language and voice are seen in dichotomy. Language signifies (Foucault, 1994; Gates, 1985; Smitherman, 1977). Here in political space, I hold that utterance simultaneously embodies and erases the existence of a people. For example, when creole<sup>143</sup> speakers use Standard English for fear of being negatively constructed, we silence our cultural voice. Consequently, guiding decisions to exist or be rendered invisible, when language is recognized and accepted, verbiage embodies the people it represents. However, when language is ignored and silenced, it

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<sup>143</sup> By "creole" I refer to those blended idioms which incorporate pidgin West African expressions. Ebonic is one of many creole languages.

conceals the identities of voice. Because of this enormous responsibility, language carries within its transmission a peculiar juxtaposition of power and vulnerability (Grumet, 1991). Language can vocalize and silence the existence of a people (Munro, 1991; Smitherman, 1986; Taylor in Goldberg, 1994).

Voice, in both form and content, is a person's identity (Bruner, 1996; Bruner, 1991; Rosenthal, 1997). Speaking in particular about the stories people tell through their unique voices, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) believe that "stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world while they shape and construct the narrator's personality and identity" (p. 79).

Voice is sound used to represent an identity. Every enunciation defines its speaker. Yet, representing verbiage is a highly complicated task for qualitative researchers (McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993). The speaker's meaning and the representation it bestows to a researcher are not always synonymous. Hence, a speaker's meaning is often reconfigured when presented to a researcher. Through this interchange, voice becomes prey to new and multiple understandings. Deborah Britzman (1989) asserts:

The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process... . Voice suggests relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the individual's relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process.



Here, Britzman points to the complicated contradictions innate in voice's relationship between itself and its audience. For Britzman, contradictions arise as the self attempts to construct meaning for another individual. Grumet (1990) likewise speaks of this difficulty in terms of the maternal voice in educational discourse. She states: "[B]urdened by nostalgia, the maternal voice in educational discourse is prey to sentimentality and to an audience that consigns its melodies to fantasy, no matter how compelling" (p. 28).

Although a speaker may seek to evoke a particular meaning, voice is an utterance couched in paradox. The paradox inherent in voice lends itself to myriad interpretations due to myriad influences. William Pinar suggests that place assists an audience in constructing multiple meanings for voice (Pinar, 1995). Pinar (1991) writes, "Place is the life force of fiction, serving as the crossroads of circumstance, the playing field on which [voice] evolves." (p. 4). In addition to place, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) see time as contributing to the paradox of voice. In other words, where the researcher is situated--in place and in time--influences how voice will be constructed by its speaker and its audience. I also contend that an audience's ability to make meaning of voice is not only historically situated in place and time, but also vacillates between both the speaker's and the listener's respective race, sex, class, and gender. I further assert that voice's meaning making is also influenced by the history of inclusion and exclusion which sought to confine subjectivities to their respective raced, sexed, classed, and gendered subjectivities<sup>144</sup>. Hence,

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<sup>144</sup> For further discussion, please see David Sibley (1995) Geographies of Exclusion.

depending on the historical situation of a researcher's and an informant's subjectivities, in my view, voice falls victim to being misunderstood and misrepresented.

In "Understanding Curriculum as Autobiography/Biographical Text," William Pinar (1995) quotes Madeline Grumet, who states: "Voice may not only express the self-affirmative, self-differentiating complexity [of its speaker]. Indeed, in the gaze of an objectifying, voyeuristic [white supremacist society], voice may be defensive" (p. 526). Relating this statement to the qualitative researcher, a person's native vernacular used to represent his or her speech may be a means of defending voice and, consequently, defending that person's identity from erasure. Yet, Grumet (1990) argues that erasure often is made possible by presenting voice as androgynous. Supposedly, because voice embodies both male and female subjectivities, an androgynous voice is homogenized, erasing signification and representation. Grumet argues that voice is a means to uncover identity. However, voice is often camouflaged by the myth of an androgynous speaker. Grumet asserts, "Drawn from the body and associated with gender, voice splinters the fiction of an androgenous speaker as we hear rhythms, relations, sounds, stories, and styles that we identify as male or female" (p. 278). I argue that race and class are also cloaked by the myth of an androgynous speaker, for every utterance carries signification (Labov, 1980). James Baldwin contends, "To open your mouth is to put your business in the street. You have confessed your parents, your youth, your salary, your self-esteem, and alas, your future" (Perry and Delpit,

1998, p. 86). In a white supremacist, capitalistic, patriarchal society, the myth of an androgynous speaker is one of many facades used to reify the dominance of white, male, middle-class subjectivities while relegating the identity of those who do not share these subjectivities to the margins (hooks, 1992).

In qualitative research, the fabrication of an androgynous speaker is often used to present voice as mainstream. However, I contend that the use of voice represented as androgynous is nonsense and highly exclusive. Too often couched in Standard English, and despite its more elucidating intents, a so-called androgynous voice embodies white, male, and middle-class representations<sup>145</sup>. Consequently, the fallacy of an androgynous voice may be seen as wholly unacceptable to those who do not share its connoted white/male/middle-class subjectivities and who have been historically marginalized because of its insidiousness. For example, defined by its highly politicized juxtaposition of educated and ignorant, a language becomes a standard in accord with the level of usage by formally educated speakers and, thus, is established as the prestigious form of that language (Ledere, 1991). Therefore, when voice is presented in Standard English, its speaker is awarded the significations of the prestigious and educated. Yet, who is the orator of Standard English? Who does this language represent? Who does this language silence? When voice is presented in a creole speech, for example, Black English, the orator must bear the burden of Standard

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<sup>145</sup> In the next section, I specifically discuss how this is made possible.

English's linguistic oppositional significations of uneducated and ignorant. Haskins & Butts (1973), in The Psychology of Black Language argue, "Language is an identity label, a reflection and badge of one's culture; criticism of an individual's speech is thus really a criticism of his culture and all those who share it" (p. 5). Accordingly, depending on the researcher's and the informants' subjectivities, as researchers attempt to androgynize themselves and informants' voices, they likewise criticize both the informants' as well as their cultural communities. Hence, I hold, that qualitative researchers must be mindful of the voices they represent and their own subjectivities.

As an African American female, I am aware that our distinct voice--like that of many other marginalized groups in the United States--is often made silent by the myth of an androgynous speaker. African Americans' peripheral subjectivity has been historically assigned based upon the color of our skin and the sounds of our "dialect" (Delpit, 1998; Williams, 1975). When we speak in black vernacular, often regardless of context, its mere juxtaposition to Standard English means that our speech and our people are uneducated and ignorant. Speaking specifically about French colonialization, Frantz Fanon (1967) argues that black voices' binary significations are constructed as a means to guide Negroes away from their indigenous culture by constituting their language and their people as inferior. Hence, Fanon maintains, "The Negro will be proportionately whiter--that is he will come closer to being a real

human being in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language" (p. 18). The same applies to black speakers of Standard English.

As an act of political resistance and as a form of postcolonial discourse, many African Americans seek to affirm positive meanings related to blackness (Carmichael in Smitherman, 1979; Dillard, 1972). One example is "cultural inversion, a process whereby subordinate group members come to define certain forms of behavior, events, symbols, and meanings as inappropriate for them because these are characteristics of their oppressors" (Ogbu, 1992, p. 8). By using cultural inversion, African Americans reinscribe positive meaning to blackness in various identity-forming mechanisms (e.g., language, culture, and schools) that are used to devalue African Americans in a white supremacist society. One of the many means African Americans use to re-define and reinscribe their identity is through the deliberate retention of our voice. This voice is commonly referred to as Ebonics (Williams, 1975). As I argued earlier, voice and language are relational and interdependent. This is no less true of Ebonics.

Ebonic speakers comprise many identities. They are literate and non-literate, wealthy and poor, women and men, heterosexual and homosexual, and a multiplicity of other subjectivities. Their being(s) is/are influenced by varied regional geographies, socioeconomic class positions, political participation, sexual preferences, and many other nonsynchronous affiliations. Qualitative researchers studying African American subjects must be aware that African Americans are heterogenous. Haskins and Butts (1973) state that

**African Americans share “a commonality of suffering as a result of blackness” (p. 29). I term this commonness “racialities.” Hence, Ebonic speakers are members of “a race because we have a common race tradition, and each one of us becomes such just in proportion as we recognize, know, and revere that tradition” (Lott, 1994, p. 235). In other words, regardless of our differences, the strands that bind Ebonic speakers to one another are our black skin and the Africanized utterances of our English tongue. These strands are the quintessential elements in our raced tradition that have enabled the creation and retention of African American culture as we recognize it today (Dillard, 1977; Outlaw, 1997; Smitherman, 1986 ).**

**Though culture has many meanings, my notion of culture is the combination of what John Van Maanen (1988) and Barley, as well as Clifford and Marcus, define as culture. Van Maanen (1988) state, “Culture is always relational, an inscription of communicative process that exist historically between subjects in relation to power” (p. 22). Barley and Clifford (1986) maintain, “Culture can be understood as a set of solutions devised by a group of people to meet specific problems posed by situations they face in common” (p. 15). In her essay “Language: Teaching New Worlds/New Words,” bell hooks (1994) points out how the oppressor’s utterances, adopted by enslaved, multi-cultural Africans, were rearranged and reappropriated as a site for cultural formation for contemporary African Americans. Specifically, she maintains:**

**In the mouths of black Africans in the so-called “New World” English was altered, transformed, and became a different speech.... Using**

English in a way that ruptured standard usage and meaning, so that white folks could not understand black speech, made English into more than the oppressor's language.... The power of this speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy but that it also forges space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies--different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic world view. (pp. 170-171)

Africans in the United States initially adopted this pidginEnglish as the language for communication between themselves and whites (hooks,1994; Gates,1985; Smitherman,1975). The "common colonial policy was to mix slaves of various tribal origins, .... slaves had no choice but to adopt as their form of communication, with each other as well as with their masters, the language common to all of them" (Haskins and Butts, 1973, p. 21). Over time, "Black vernacular came to assume the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue. It is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals" (Labov in Gates,1988). As years passed, this pidgin tongue developed into a creole speech, commonly referred to today as Ebonics, Black English, or black sounds ( Dillard,1977; Perry and Delpit, 1998; Smitherman,1986; Williams, 1975).

Ebonics is a language that involves the substitution of West African words and sounds for English words and sounds. As a language, Black English has the same structures and idioms that are characteristic of West African language patterns (Smitherman, 1977). Among the many shared characteristics of Black English with West African languages, Smitherman

(1977, p.7) shares three examples. One is the construction of sentences with the repetition of a noun subject with a pronoun: "My mother, she left the store." A second example is substitution of /t/ for /th/ and dropping final /r/ sounds at the end of words: "mouf" instead of "mouth" or "do" instead of "door." A third example is pronouncing initial /th/ sounds as d/ sounds: "those" pronounced as "dose." June Jordan (1985) in her text On Call maintains that when using Ebonics, "regardless of intentional verb time, [speakers] only use the third person singular [and] present indicative, for use of the verb 'to have,' as an auxiliary" (p. 130). In applying this Ebonics rule to Standard English, "She saw Columbus coming" translates to "She seen Columbus dem cumin."

Additionally, Smitherman (1977) finds that the use of negative terms with positive meanings, in Black English, as in many African languages, is also proper. For example, in Mandingo "*aka nyi ko-jugu*," translated in Standard English means "It is good badly," while in Mandigo it means "It is very good" (p. 44). The use of negative expressions to denote positive meanings can also be found when Ebonic speakers say "African American culture is the bomb" which translates as "African American culture is extremely extraordinary" (hooks, 1994; Jordan, 1985; Smitherman, 1986).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1995), in writing or representing an informant's story, qualitative researchers make a claim "to moral and scientific authority. These claims allow the realist and the experimental ethnographic text to function as a source of validation for an empirical science" (p. 10). Because voice and experiences are intricately woven through language, this



claim is a highly ethical issue for those researchers engaged in studies with creole speakers. Determining whose voice and identity will represent a speaker is a very complicated endeavor. In this dissertation project, I have deliberately represented teachers'/students' voices in their creole speech<sup>146</sup>. In other words, in representing their voice as southern, urban, poor and working class, Ebonic speakers, I have consciously decided to utilize their language and their identity to construct and weave meaning throughout this dissertation. However, I am mindful that by taking this stance, some may disregard students'/historians' messages because their words appear incomprehensible or because readers may critique my work as less than academically sound. Reflecting the dilemma of representing African American voice in his oral history research project, entitled African American Music: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, student/historian Butu concluded:

If I left my interview with rap group Po' Kunditions in Ebonic then whoever read our book probably wouldn't have paid attention to them. They'd probably be like, well what is that they saying. They'd put the book down and keep on going.

This student/historian was concerned that readers would not read Po' Kundition's message because they would not be able to understand Po' Kundition's verbiage. His concern was legitimate. Most often when people do not understand what another is saying, particularly when the language is seen

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<sup>146</sup>Because Ebonics is an oral tradition and reflects a regional context (Jordan, 1985; Smitherman, 1977), it is a very difficult language to write. I am an African American and a proud Ebonic speaker native to Tennessee. There our regional Ebonics varies from the form of Ebonics spoken by many of my native Louisiana students. Thus, I remained as close to my students' language as possible.

as crude, rather than discovering ways to make meaning possible, they simply disregard the speech. Hence, echoing the sentiments of bell hooks (1994), as I share students'/historians' experiences with oral history as real education and fleshed out their messages through their voice, I ask my reader to consider bell hooks' pedagogical practice:

[T]o think of the moment of not understanding what someone says as a space to learn. Such a space provides not only the opportunity to listen without "mastery," without owning or possessing speech through interpretation, but also the experience of hearing non-English words. These lessons seem particularly crucial in a multicultural society that remains white supremacist, that uses standard English as a weapon to silence and censor. (p. 172)

In the next section, I further historically situate why centering students'/historians' voices is important to me and this study.

### **Degradation or Validation: Complicating Representation**

*Language is the distance between self and other... to speak is to exist absolutely for the other. (Fanon, 1967, p. 17)*

In a conversation with a professor with whom I was facilitating an oral history project, a debate ensued about how our African American informants' voices should be represented in our final publication. The issue, for me, was whether we should use Ebonics, a historically marginalized voice, or translate their stories into Standard English--in my view, the language of domination. Without hesitation, I argued that informants' distinct voices should be used for their representations. Because I was cognizant of the historical implications of Standard English and its political nature, I held that representing African American speakers in Ebonics was an absolute necessity. My position was if

this is the way informants talk, then this is the way informants should be represented. As an intellectual and a budding academic, I feel strongly about representing African Americans' voices in Ebonics because I see the use of Ebonics as an opportunity to disrupt misconceptions which give life to colonialism through the death of historically marginalized knowing. Standard English, like any other verbiage, is a simple utterance. However, long ago Standard English was elevated to a status above simple verbiage through the institution of a grammarian discipline created and maintained through race and class predispositions.

Ebonics contains semiotic consistency and embodies meanings which carry multiple and often contradictory significations. Ebonics was born when enslaved Africans came to the Americas and needed to communicate inter-ethnically as well as intra-racially (Williams, 1975). This blended idiom, which continues to evolve today, later developed into a language system for enslaved Africans and their succeeding generations (Labov, 1985; McGinnis, 1975).

Although this linguistic form permitted communication to take place, Standard English was the voice used to determine correct or incorrect English in the United States. Geneva Smitherman (1975) maintains that the obsession with speaking "correct English" (p. 36) came from a newlyrisen middle class, former peasants who gained wealth as a result of the Industrial Revolution and who wanted to shed their impoverished identity markers. Because of their classed voice, these former peasants' beggared signification

lingered despite their newly acquired monetary gains. Wanting to be represented as equal to the old aristocracy, the newly risen middle-class Europeans created the grammarian discipline to teach themselves how to speak the King's English. Smitherman (1975) writes:

The correctness obsession was a logical consequence of the coming to power of the "primitive" middle classes and the decline of the "refined" aristocracy in the post middle ages Europe. Pushed into prominence by the Industrial Revolution and expanding technology, the newly-risen middle class posed a potentially powerful threat to the declining aristocracy. The fears were unfounded because this new group wanted only to adapt and be accepted by their "betters," and they wanted neither themselves nor their children to reflect any kinship with those they had left behind. Instead they wanted rules and conduct, linguistic and social, so as not to belie their rural and/or lower class origins. (p. 35)

Diminishing in number, the aristocracy could not force the budding middleclass to comply with their ways of knowing and being. However, having already inculcated a belief that associated poverty with being less than the aristocracy, this newly risen middleclass wanted nothing more than to shed their peasant identity and be accepted by those who were considered their betters. In a discussion on Foucault's analysis of power, Ransom (1997) holds that "every power relationship needs willing participants in order to insure their productive participation" (p. 126) . Willing participation is encouraged through the construction of knowledge and its association with truth. Hence, former peasants not only held that the aristocracy was better than they were, they believed it to be true.

The grammarian discipline was created through the development of textbooks. Grammarians were responsible for teaching this newly risen

**middleclass how to speak “correct” English and share this identity marker with the aristocracy. By speaking “correct” English, these non-aristocrats believed that they would be able to change their identity and, hence, would elevate their identity representation above peasantry. Even though the newly risen middle-class did not share aristocratic kinship, through the King’s English they became just like those they considered as their betters.**

**Over time, the aristocrat’s voice was used as a gauge to determine who was and was not speaking “correct” English. Becoming an obsession, an aristocratic voice was used as a gauge to determine normal and abnormal English. Ransom (1997) notes that a “norm is a standard of some kind that a multiplicity of individuals must reach and maintain to perform certain tasks” (p. 171). Again, using a Foucauldian analysis, Ransom argues that “disciplines . . . have ‘norms’ in a non-‘normative’ sense [by] establish[ing] standards that act as performance goals for each individual.” Thus one rises to the occasion of normative for “few are actually normal. This norm contributes to a conception of the ‘natural’ (thus normal) human body” (pp. 47-48). According to this position, nothing is normal. Institutions construct what is needed and, based upon human capacities, determine what one can and cannot do. For example, as stated earlier by Smitherman, the newly risen middleclass maintained that speaking “correct” English was needed in order to shed their peasant identity and created a grammarian discipline to learn how to enunciate that verbiage correctly. As a result, measures for Standard English and non-Standard English were also created. Standard English came to**

signify the voice of the intelligent while non-Standard English came to signify the voice of the ignorant.

Despite its linguistic utility, Ebonics, a language spoken by impoverished, enslaved, and non-literate people, came to be recognized as a dialect rather than a language. Speaking about his desire to become an attorney and the necessity for him to learn Standard English, student/historian Daraja claimed:

You wouldn't really want to go to a lawyer who is going to go into a court room speaking Ebonic. You want a lawyer sounding proper, sounding like they really know what they're talking about.

Deemed dialect, Ebonics became a curse and not a blessing for those hoping to present themselves as intelligent and/or American, for "correct" English was the language spoken by educated Americans in the United States (Michel, 1992). Ebonics, on the other hand, was the plantation idiom, the savage utterance of the enslaved Africans (Brathwaite, 1984). Grammarians maintained that speaking Standard English was natural and then measured others to see whether or not they were linguistically normal (Ransom, 1997; Smitherman, 1975).

Frantz Fanon (1967) informs his readers that language is the distance between self and other. He assuredly holds that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (p. 17). In other words, language serves to signify its speaker. Depending on the signifier, one may be constituted based upon his or her words and actions, as the savage or the civilized, the black or the white (Foucault in Miller, 1993). Fanon continues by asserting that this split in

signification is a direct result of a white supremacist, capitalistic society, whose "major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man" (p. 17). Accordingly, with the King's English serving as the gauge for normalcy, the designation of abnormality for the Ebonic speaker is determined based upon normalizing notions of racial and class superiority (Outlaw, 1997).

Compliance with these norms silences the distinct voice and unique representation of many African American people. As a result, many African Americans are compelled to comply with linguistic measures of normalcy. Compliance is encouraged through a panopticon, is a psychological surveillance camera instilled to insure, in covert ways, that abnormal individuals will conform to standard norms (Foucault in Ransom, 1997). Through a panopticon, subjects are coerced into carrying out the functions prescribed by a discipline (Ransom, 1997). In the United States, according to Dubois (1903) in the Souls of Black Folks, this imaginary gaze is made possible by white supremacy's deliberate creation of an inferiority complex. This inferiority complex is accomplished through the death and burial of what I call our Mamma's voice, our cultural origination (hooks, 1992; James, 1954; Karenga, 1993). I assert that through the culture of what I refer to as our stepmother, in conventional American history, African Americans find themselves "face to face with the voice of the 'civilizing' nation" (Cabral, 1970, p. 83). "The black man believes he is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of his [Stepmother's] tongue" (Fanon, 1967, p. 18).

The stepmother's gaze functions as the panoptican "work[ing] to 'turn' the gross, empirical social offender into normal by inculcating more socially acceptable habits and dispositions (Ransom, 1997, p. 46) and, I would add, linguistic forms. Thus, Foucault (1979) writes: "The mechanics of power define how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that the discipline provides" (p. 138). In other words, the stigmatization of proper/improper language becomes the mechanism for disciplining bodies while silencing souls. During the 1930s, Carter G. Woodson (1933/1990/1998a) also spoke of the influence of the mechanics of power. He stated:

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his proper place and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefits. (p. xiii)

Understanding fully that the "mastery of language affords remarkable power," African Americans realize that they "become white as [they] renounce [their] blackness, [their] language, [their] jungle" (Fanon, 1967, p.18). Yet, depending upon the audience, Ebonics can be signified as the utterance of the savage or the civilized, the ignorant or the educated (Foucault quoted in Ransom, 1997).

Nonetheless, in contradiction to these binary representations, many African Americans are aware that speaking Ebonics has an inherent



paradoxical nature. Speaking Ebonics is more than signifying one's identity as dialect or Standard English. Speaking Ebonics, as Henry Louis Gates (1988) states in The Signifying Monkey, is "like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and redoubled upon ever closer examination" (p. 44). This embodied contradiction is created because racist and classist notions of white supremacy cannot wholly determine its subjects. Foucault explains, "the process of what we call 'subjectivization' is provisional, never completed, resulting in a plural and shifting psychic structure, [thus] it follows that individuals can be constituted without, however, being determined" (quoted in Ransom, 1997, p. 120).

Furthermore, subjectivity depends on its audience. A subject may be constituted, but it can never be wholly determined because significations will vary depending upon its viewer and its listener. For example, although there are many African Americans whose desire to be viewed as intelligent compels them to comply with the linguistic mandates of Standard English, there are other African Americans who believe that speaking Ebonics is intelligent and should be celebrated through every enunciation of a black person's speech. Foucault (1994) argues that significations revert upon themselves because language is fictive. He states:

Fiction does not exist because language is at a distance from things. Language is the distance. It is as if words produced a kind of diffuse and artificially generated "light," revealing that things exist while simultaneously reminding us of the "inaccessibility" of these things apart from language. (p. 130)

**Foucault also holds that "the subject is actually a plurality of subjectivities, each adapted to specific spheres, while interacting with one another as well" (quoted in Ransom, 1997, pp. 122-123). Wholly determining a speaker is impossible because subjectivities often intersect and cross over one another. Moreover, since a full self is a multiplicity of subjectivities, "language is a part of human activity, a form of life; its rules are accordingly not something fixed, or given for all" (Foucault in Miller, 1994, p. 131). Nonetheless, as writers of experiences, naming for qualitative researchers becomes the venue for framing existence. Hence, I hold, in writing a subject's story their identity and situations fall prey to the knowings of their author.**

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**Appendix A**  
**First Steps: Contract Agreement**



# McKinley Senior High School

800 E. McKinley Street - Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70802

Phone 344-7696 Fax 387-5435

Principal  
Almenia F. Williams

September 15, 1998

Dear: Parent(s)

My name is Ms. LaVada U. Taylor. This school year your child will be apart of a curriculum project that will use a teaching method known as Oral History. Thus, no text books will be issued but students are required to gather research and conduct interviews on their perspective subtopics.

This semester the focus of our project will be the Music of the South Baton Rouge Community. Through this topic students will not only study the music of popular culture, ie Rap and Hip Hop, but they will also focus on the development of African American music from the Congas of West Africa to the sounds that they most enjoy today.

In addition to the Oral History component, students are also required to read two novels. One is the classic The Mis Education of the Negro by Carter G. Woodson. The other required reading will be the contemporary novel Outlaw Culture by bell hooks. Also, periodically, I will provide students with outside articles and we will view such movie videos as Sankofa, Ethnic Notions, and Daughters of the Dust. We will also attend two field trips. One is scheduled for Oct. 7, 1998, "Blues in Schools". This is a blues concert and will be held at Baton Rouge Magnet High School. The date of our other field trip will be announced at a later date but it will be one of the students choice.

Ultimately, the purpose of this method and the materials that I've chosen to share with the student/historians is to foster a sense of history not as a presentation of

disconnected and irrelevant materials, but as a very influential part of their every day lives.

Additionally, the methodology presented through this course will be documented for the purpose of my doctoral dissertation. Thus periodically and with your permission, I will conduct interviews with your son/daughter to find out their feelings about this form of teaching in comparison to more tradition forms of teaching. Consequently, I will need for you read and sign the attached consent form and have your child return this form to me on tomorrow September 16,1998. This consent form defines the aims and intent of this research project.

Last but not least, it is very important to me that you give your child permission to engage in the reading of the materials, attend field trips, and view the movies chosen for this class. Thus please sign below stating that you give you permission. If you have any questions or comments, I can be reached at McKinley High School 344-7696 or at home 383-6520. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Ms. LaVada U. Taylor

\_\_\_\_\_ give my permission

(Print Parents Name)

for \_\_\_\_\_ to engage in the reading materials, attend

(Students Name)

Field trips, and view movies chosen for the African American Studies Class.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

### **The Agreement**

I \_\_\_\_\_ fully understand my class responsibilities and on this day \_\_\_\_\_ give my consent to follow these rules and regulations. I understand that failure to follow these rules could possibly result in my failure of the course and or dismissal from the 1998-1999 McKinley High School Oral History Project

\_\_\_\_\_  
first and last name

\_\_\_\_\_  
date

## **Appendix B**

### **Mamma Said Yes & I Did, Too: Parental Consent Form and Student Assent Form**

## ***Making A Difference With African American Learners: A Classroom Study of Oral History as Pedagogy***

Dr. Wendy Kohli, Faculty Supervisor (504)388-2446  
Ms. LaVada U. Taylor, Doctoral Student and Principal Investigator (504)383-6520

Dear Parent(s):

My name is Ms. LaVada U. Taylor. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Louisiana State University. During the 1998-1999 school year at McKinley Sr. High School, I will be conducting my doctoral dissertation research.

Using Urban African American high school students, my research will seek to compare and contrast the benefits and limitation of a progressive pedagogy referred to as Oral History, to more traditional approaches to teaching and learning. I am interested in views and opinions of son/daughter as apart of this research. This will entail them participating in three tape recorded interviews of no more than 1 hour in length. These interviews will be conducted sporadically throughout the 1998-1999 academic year. Additionally, throughout the academic year video recordings will be conducted during class time.

Because of the nature of this project there are no potential risk. However, at any time he/she may withdraw from this study. The benefits will include the documentation of a teaching pedagogy that may serve to enhance the academic performance and academic interest of urban African American students through out the United States. Unless parents or guardians of participants inform other wise, the actual names of informants will not be released. Interviewee tapes will be stored at the Williams Center of Oral History at LSU.

Please sign the consent form below, if you agree to allow your son or daughter to participate in this study. If you have any questions or concern contact me at your earliest convenience at the above phone number.

Sincerely,

Ms. LaVada U. Taylor

I have been fully informed of the above described procedures with it possible benefits and risks and I give my child permission to participate in the study: "Making A Difference With African American Learners: A Classroom Study of Oral History as Pedagogy".

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Parent Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Making a Difference With African American Learners:  
A Classroom Study of Oral History as Pedagogy**  
(Participant Assent Form)

May 6, 1999

This assent form indicates that the following participants in the study—Making a Difference with African American Learners: A Classroom Study of Oral History as Pedagogy— have been informed of the purpose and intents of the study and do hereby agree to participate in this study.

Name	Age	Date
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____
6. _____	_____	_____
7. _____	_____	_____
8. _____	_____	_____
9. _____	_____	_____
10. _____	_____	_____

**Appendix C**  
**The Class We Took: A Syllabus**



**African American History**  
**Ms. LaVada Taylor**  
**Monday--Friday 9:24-10:17**  
**Rm: C209**

**Brief Course Overview:** This semester you will be involved in the process of becoming historians. History is a huge subject area. Our interest particularly for this course is African American history. And more specifically African Americans of your community. Consequently, you will be challenged in this course "to get all up in the business" (history that is) of extraordinary African American who made or are making history and living in your community today. You will be responsible for sharing their sagas and transforming their stories into history.

**Course Expectations:** As historians it is essential for all members in this course to:

(1) Be present and on time for class daily  
class begins at 9:24am-10:17am

(2) Be prepared for class

materials needed:

- \*Ink Pens and Pencils
- \*A Standard Legal Note Pad
- \*A Camera
- \*Webster College Dictionary
- \*Thesaurus
- \*(1) 3 prong 2 pocket folder
- \* College rule note book paper

(3) Respect the Golden Rule "Do unto Others as You Should Have Them Do Unto You"

no disin' of each other or guests

(4) No chewing gum during class

**Course Requirements:** Each historian will be required to (1) keep and maintain a reflective daily journal. The title of the journal will be THE BRAIN TEASER. You will be required to begin each week in your journal with a quiz sheet.

Ex.

8/24/98	8/25/98
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
8/26/98	8/27/98
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Dailey during the first five minutes of class you will have a brief quiz or review over topics previously discussed and or read. Also included in your BRAIN TEASER should be all Tests, I say (Essays) and Friday Book-a- Rap entries.

**McKinley High School  
Fall 1998  
African American Studies  
Course Syllabus**

**September 8-October 6: Researching the Topic**

**Objectives:** Students will engage in library/inter net research and a panel discussion in order to gather information about their respective topic of interest.

**September 8:** Library Research/ Scheduling of Interview

**September 9:** Library Research/ Scheduling of Interview

**September 10:** Library Research/ Scheduling of Interview

**September 11:** Weekly Journal due

**September 14:** Library Research/ Scheduling of Interview

**September 15-18: Introduction to Oral History**

**Objectives:** Students will be introduced to the concepts and methods involved in creating an oral history project.

**September 15:** Writing open-ended interview question

**September 16:** Practicing with each other

**September 17:** How to use a tape recorder

**September 18:** Weekly Journal due

**September 21-October 22: Interviewing, Indexing, & Transcribing**

**Objectives:** Students will engage previous skills mastered through hands on experience by conducting interviews as well as indexing and transcribing the information gathered.

**September 21:** Panel Discussion--The History of African American Music lead by local African American artist

**September 22:** Interviewing and Indexing

**September 23:** Interviewing and Indexing

**September 24:** Interviewing and Indexing

**September 25:** Weekly Journal due

**September 28:** Interviewing and Indexing

**September 29:** Interviewing and Indexing

**September 30:** Interviewing and Indexing

**October 1:** Interviewing and Indexing

**October 2:** Weekly Journal Due

**October 5-8:** Transcribing

**October 9:** Journal due

**October 12-15:** Transcribing

**October 16:** Weekly Journal due

**October 19-22:** Transcribing

**October 23: Weekly Journal due**

**October 26-Nov 20: Editing**

Objective: Students using the information they acquired via the interviews will (re) compose these historical accounts publication purposes.

October 26-29: Editing

October 30: Journal Due-- Outlaw Culture by bell hooks

Nov. 2-5: Editing

Nov. 6: Journal Due

Nov. 9-10: Editing

Nov. 11: No School

Nov. 12: Editing

Nov. 13: Journal Due

Nov. 16-19: Editing

Nov. 20: Journal Due

Nov. 23-27: Thanksgiving Holiday--No School

**Nov. 30- Dec. 18: Final Touches on Editing/ Preparing for Presentation**

Objective: Students will complete their editing process and begin to make preparations for their final presentation to the school and the community.

**Dec. 21-Jan 1: Christmas Break No School**

**Jan 4-Jan 7: Preparation for Presentation Continues**

**Jan. 11-14: Final Presentation**

Objective: In an effort to show their appreciation for the time and attention given to this project, students will present in the form of a slide presentation, short play, and or video presentation back to the school and the community the information gathered during their interviews.

Jan. 11: Prepare for Presentation

Jan. 12: Prepare for Presentation

Jan. 14: Final Presentation (Exam)

Jan. 15: Journal Due--End of 1st Semester

Jan. 18: Martin Luther King Holiday--No School

**Appendix D**  
**Hot on the Trail: Students'/Historians' Transcriptions**

Date: November 2, 1998  
Interviewer: David Simpson  
Interviewee: Shane Bennett  
Transcriber: David Simpson

David: Alright could you please state your name?

Shane: Shane Bennett

David: How old are you ?

Shane: 21

David: Umm, could you tell us your place of birth ?

Shane: Baton Rouge

David: Alright and State ?

Shane: Louisiana

David: Do you have any brothers or sisters ?

Shane: Three brothers one sister

David: Ok..., What is your mother and fathers name ?

Shane: Well my moma name Ossi Bennett, I'on know my daddy's name

David: O.K., How long have you been rapping ?

Shane: Shhhhhh, probly bout 89, 88

David: O.K. What influences led you to rapp ?

Shane: It was a hobby you no what um sayin... supin a nigga just did fa fun, know what um sayin, or sompin a nigga a do just to get a little change in nay pocket , go huy some candy. you know what um sayin. But then it came to sompin grater. cuzz you know anythang the longer you stick wir it the more its gone become apart of you, you know what um sayin. so you know evennually it just came out inta what it is

now.

David: Alright, What does rapp mean to you ?

Shane: It's like an expression of you know what um sayin, another side of a person you know what um sayin you could sit up there and you could talk to somebody an git a feel from- um, that if you here rapp you know I'm sayin ... an if they be on a hole nother level which you can relate but you probubly didn't look at him that way you know what um sayin, thats his otherside, you know what um saying. everybody got two sides to em.

David: Why did you choose this form of music?

Shane: ( Pausing).... Shhhit I'an no mufuckin singa. you know what um sayin it just was the thang to do back then you had all em old school rappers, doing nay thang you know nigga really made a nigga wont'a. you know,rapp so you know. So you know I guess all the glitter of the big chains and stuff you know what um sayin.. put-it on a nigga mind (Carnell: You know put it on a nigga mind, Shane: yehhh fa show.)

David: What was the most complicated task in being a rapper?

Shane: (Pausing)....Puttin up wit bullshit. you know a lota bullshit you know whatum sayin that you might not evenmuch have contrroll over you know what um sayin.. and shit sometimes you got to sitback and shit roll like it roll, like it roll you know.

David: How is your style of rapp diffrent from others ?

Shane: Well my my style is not really the style it's not really diffrent its the verbal atcak you know what um sayin it's what um sayin, you know what um sayin, if you really sit there and look into what um sayin, it's all around you, it's Baton Rouge you

know what um sayin, thats the diffrence in it. nobody from Baton Rouge eva did dat you know what um sayin. We got two National Artist you know what um sayin that you varily shhh.youn even much here them say Highlandroad you know what um sayin and you gotta travel down Highlandroad if you from Baton Rouge or from the South you Know what um sayin. I just fell certain spots or certain areas certain thangs should be you know what um sayin brought to the table ta let a person know that this is Baton Rouge you know...this not New Orleans,. this not this person, this is the atmosphere down here. ( Carnell: this was really going on in nat rouge. )

David: How does your music affect the listener, or his or her enviornment ?

Shane: ....Cause one thang when a nigga listen to Pokundishons you know um sayin, he gone say...( Carnell: thats me.) that relates to me because thats something I done did or um going through you know what um sayin. It ain't a lot em jumpin out the car with my gat rat-a-tat-tat, you know em sayin. Its' more on that..... knockin on heavens doo askin do you have room for one moo cause I'an to show you know what um sayin letin a nigga know that it's anotha way. It's anotha way, everybody cain't be a thugyou gotta be a man sonna or lata..

David: If you could change anything in your rapp what would it be ?

Shane: The sounds I mean I wouldn't really change nothing in my rapp it just a be you know like right now we tryin to work on getting fresher sounds like real fuckin horns an you know what em sayin, tubas an all lat you know zyalaphones you know not that old computerized shit cause it two diffrent sounds you know what em sayin. I just feel if we had that we'll have a batta you know what em sayin array

of music for people it wouldn't be somthin flat it a little (making noise). you know

David: Is there anything else you would like to share that we didn't mention ?

Shane: The fact that.... everybody at one point of time...hold they position and they point of life you know what em sayin. Its all about being patient and some people have to depend on other people in order to make it and thats how it is with this rapp you know em really looking for support from you know what em sayin everybody I know, you know basicly my city you know what em sayin. I mean I ant tellin nobody to go out there and C.D's like crazy and we get rich because that ain't what's gone happen you buy the C.D. and you a see another organization come up from out your own city thats just like with " P " you know what em sayin. I know everybody would love to see that there album. a big organization strait from Baton Rouge and shhhid after that happen Baton Rouge could have Baton Rouge and New Orleans could be New Orleans and Texas could be Texas you know what em sayin. ( Carnell: we devide all this shit in na one.)Srait up.. I mean we got niggas shhhid commin from other states comin down this mufucka talkin nat ( Carnell: yea talking that shit they talkin about up there, But they actually they hiddin out here) shit... but they hiddin out here... you know what em sayin . But not to speak up on another nigga, but you know, being real is being real. If you from this mufucka speak about this mufucka let a nigga know this is Baton Rouge. C-LOC did a very; you know he did nice job, and Young Bleed did a very good job you know em sayin. shhhid thats just two niggas. ( Yea thats just two.)

David: Can we contact you for a follow up interview ?

Shane: Shit yea. Double oo allways available : laughing ) shhhhii



David: Could you give us names of people we could contact for potential interviews?

Shane: Well that depends... when you git in contact with me you knw what em sayin..

David : Well that all ...thats all we needed right there.

Date: November 2, 1998  
Interviewer: Heidi McGee  
Interviewee: Kwaku Agyeman'yeboah  
Transcriber: Heidi McGee  
Subject: African Music

Heidi: Could you please state your full name and date of birth?

Kwaku: My name is ah Kwaku Agyeman'yeboah date of birth 01-31-73.

Heidi: How long have you been an African musician?

Kwaku: How long have I been in African music?

Heidi: Um, huh!

Kwaku: Well ahh, I would say all my life, but my culture right at birth, I mean they meet you with music so I would listen to music since I was born. But um to really pass spirit, taking care, I mean taking part in the music myself ever since seven years old.

Heidi: Where did this music originate?

Kwaku: Where did this music originate from?, Oh it's handed down my sister to my sister, it's part of the culture, and it's handed down from generation to generation so it's been there for a very long time and it's part of my culture the Ashanti people.

Heidi: Huh!

Kwaku: I'm an Ashanti and it's a part of Ashanti.

Heidi: What does this type of music mean to you?

Kwaku: They have various types of music for various occasions <sup>for</sup> various ceremonies so it depends on what particular music or all particular kind of things going on to decide what type of music to play.

Heidi: Okay, what does African music in general mean to you personally.

Kwaku: Oh, personally African music why I would say it's part of my culture and my heritage and I try to keep it as much as possible and to try and let it stay the way it is even though some people try to change it a little bit, but ah it means alot to me it's part of my culture it's something I was born with and ah therefor I like and want to be part of it.

Heidi: Okay, I know you said it was passed down from sister to sister, but was there anyone in particular who inspired you to like keep going?

Kwaku: Yes! Umm, my uncle I stay with my uncle for a year and he's the one who got me into it.

Heidi: Okay, What was the most complicated task in this type of music?

Kwaku: Trying to learn the various beats used for various ceremonies and various occasions trying to defrienciate it and know when to play what, cause playing the wrong beat at the wrong occasion can cause confusion about different problems. And it's kind of funny, but it's real serious playing a different beat or a different kind of music at a particular ceremony could cause a real big problem for you.

Heidi: Different?, types of what?, ya'll play different music for different things like marriages and death.

Kwaku: Yeah!, have different kind of music for marriage, different type of music for death, birth for or all kinds of, all kinds of stuff. So you know it would not be appropriate for to play music for death at a birth ceremony, or a naming ceremony. You have to know to diffirenciate from which is which .

Heidi: Could you tell us like an example of which is which?

Kwaku: Ahh, really not, not yet. Okay I can say this the death music is really slow is more solom, and ah rejoice um the birth of a baby is happiness everybody rejoice I mean it's more of ah happy kind of thing kind of fast, fast pace the death is more of a slow solom kind of music.

Heidi: What would you have done differently in becoming an African muscian and why?

Kwaku: I would say I would have learned it at an earlier age.

Heidi: Earlier than seven?

Kwaku: Yeah, earlier than seven, some people start earlier than seven three years old start playing drums, start playing, no it really be at master right then, but ah that age it would pick up better than...

Heidi: At that age?..

Kwaku: Yes, than I did.

Heidi: Could you tell me about your style?

Kwaku: My style, What do you mean about like do I have my specific style?

Heidi: Yesah, do you have your own specific style.

Kwaku: Yeah, well I would say everybody has their style, Well ah, well ah. What I try to do, I try to ah incorporate other kinda music into it, to see how it would come out.

Heidi: In what ways is this music influenced by the African culture today?

Kwaku: My style?

Heidi: Well, just the music in general like, not just the Africans, but people down here too, what influence do you think it has on us.

Kwaku: Well, uhh. African music for say is, even though it's been handed down from generation to generation it has been influenced by alot of factors I mean depending on where you live and where you've been. People use bigger instruments, depending on what they have available. Alot of musical instruments that I've played that I... if I went home back in Ghana I would play, but I don't have them here so I have to improvise right!, In that case I may not have the right kind of sound therefor I'm influencing, I'm actually changing the music cause, this isn't the real thing and I'm trying to do the real thing. But what I have is not the real thing so I'm content to what I have with. So depending on what you do or where you're at or what you have with you, also help influence the music, and most often I would say typical Africans or would I say people born in the country and lived on the continent have a different way of playing the same kind of music than people here. I play the Jimbay differently than people from here, people here well blacks are used to

hip hop and all that kind of stuff so they kind of play the Jimbay to that kind of level. A fast pace low kind of beat different kind of beat.

Heidi: Could you like more briefly explain the difference between African music and other types of music today?

Kwaku: Yeah, African music I would say, with African music farga instrument that I use they're all hand made instruments. All indigiginal instruments, the drums carved out of a tree, the shakers are all calabacious, the gargo is made of hot metal found on the ground, it's all indiginal and it's still being used, and wherever you go and can play traditional African music is to find the same kind of instrument being used. But in modern music you have all kind of stuff they use now synthesizers but with the traditional African music the instruments that were being used is the same instruments being used, even though they may have modified just a little bit, but it's still the traditional stuff.

Heidi: Is there any other information that I didn't ask you about that you would like to talk about?

Kwaku: Ahh!, I really don't know what to say, but ah. Okay, let me share this with you. With African music there is no specific style to it. There is no uh specific format to it, you don't write it like the way Beno and <sup>Bechor</sup> Hundew or Bach would write his music. There is no specific way of doing it. It's out of intuition and out of skill that's suppose to be different drum beats and stuff, ah, ah, ah, made and we kind of mix messages with our music, we tell stories with our music, everything that was created with music have meaning. I mean somewhere in my country they have someone playing music he actually trying to tell you a story or trying to carry a message across to you. He might not come to you and say hey this is what I want to tell you, but he come to your house and the type of music he play on his drum, or he go to his house and what he's doing his music he's playing he's trying to send a message to you. And this is basically what we do. During ceremonies like I told you, the music let everybody know when they passing by and they play their music, oh he know the kind of thing going on here oh a baby been born in this house, that's why they playing this kind of music. He goes around the corner and hears another type of music he knows that somebody dead and that's why they're playing this type of music. Everything lets' you know what a situation is what is prevailing, and like I said this just carries messages and this is a way of communicating a means of communicating. But I mean send an expression, so that they can express themselves.

Heidi: So ya'll, well not ya'll, but the Africans explain themselves through their music!?

Kwaku: Yeah, they express themselves through their music alot.

Heidi: Could you give us any names of any other people we can contact for potential interviews containing this type of music?

Kwaku: Names?, a person from the continient or a person from here I know.

Heidi: A person from here so I could get in contact with.

**Kwaku:** No name can I don't have any name right at the top of my head, but I know, I know a few people, but I just don't have a name at the top of my head and what I can do is uh, is try and locate the names and uh leave it with Ms. Taylor.

**Heidi:** Can we contact you for a follow up interview?

**Kwaku:** Yeah, Whatever you need me to do to help if you need me to play some drums for you at any point in time.

**Heidi:** Thank you for letting us interview you and this ends the interview.

*Veribon*

Date: November 2, 1998  
Interviewer: David Sampson  
Interviewee: Mr. Alvin Batiste  
Transcriber: Kim Turner  
Subject: Jazz

David: How ya doing Mr. Batiste?

Alvin: Oh I'm fine, and you

David: I'm doing pretty good.

David: My name is David Simpson and augh this is our African American Studies class

and we're doing an interview on Jazz.

David: We're going to start off really we asking you augh, Could you please state your full name for us?

Alvin: Augh, my full name is, my full name is augh Alvin Batiste

David: Okay, augh what is your place of birth?

Alvin: My augh, I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. and I went to school there.

David: Okay and could you tell us your age please?

Alvin: Augh I'm 65 or 66 ( Alvin and the class is laughing) be, becoming 66

David: Could you explain your educational background in detail?

Alvin: I was augh educated at F.P. Ricard Elementary school in New Orleans  
Booker T. Washington Highschool, Southern University  
in Baton Rouge and LSU in Baton Rouge.

David: What is your occupation?

Alvin: Augh, I'm a professional clarinetess and an educator in Jazz, that is.  
Teach Jazz.

David: Could you state your mother's maiden name or your father's maiden name?

Alvin: Frankie Rodney and augh Edgar Batiste.

David: How many sisters and brothers do you have?

Alvin: I have one sister.

David: One sister, Could you tell us where Jazz originated from?

Alvin: In generally, when you ask a question like that you're talking about some place in a culture or in a particular situation but I like to take the leisure just to augh give you another idea because of the time that we live in. because it's a basic characters that young people like yourself have and because of the fact that you're much more intelligent in a sense than previous generations in terms of what you have been exposed to of augh to living augh living conditions and change.

Alvin: There are a lot of young people who have to take care of themselves to a greater degree than in the past so I wanna, where as Jazz historically is said to have begun in New Orleans augh I want to say that ( and I want you to think about it) Jazz started in the human consciousness, consciousness is simply augh awareness augh you can define consciousness as a response that living things make to the environment, so in various churches people respond on this awareness

and they do things that have to do with natural forces like tunnels, like cuisine, like architecture, like words and ideas and books.

Alvin: So Jazz started augh emerged out of the musical consciousness of the African Americans and when you say African Americans you're talking about Americans whose ethnic legacy goes back to Africa and it's a very augh intresting thing when augh you reconize that in 1998, because we are acheiving more maturity as Americans in other words African Americans, Euro-Americans this here Adriotic Americans are comming together to add simiular experiences there are many enequates in augh the experiences that we have the resources that are given to use but you people represent the augh most mature generation in that respect or the most Americanized augh having lived for over sixty years i'm always impressed with the fact that augh if you put somebody behind a screen and heard students talking they would be talking about the same subject many times using the same slang and what have you when I was a kid it wasn't like that your ethnesity made you stand out, you understand where I'm coming from, ok, so the um jazz arose uh uh out of the human conscious but it supposedly had started in New Orleans, and there is a place where the historians by the way would you history, (history) everybody (history) again please (history), say it a little slower (history) a litle slower (history) now that's the deal right there his story, so somebody set up where we are talking about where jazz come from they they edit see you understand what I'm saying, they get the best information that's was available at that particular time so and its just like in the library , you have a whole lot of that in the library so what happens when you get in the library that you have to develop uh you have to acquire the mystery . Let me here you say mystery (mystery) again (mystery) slower (mystery) slower (mystery) slower (mystery) slower (mystery) My story so if you don't engage in these books and if you don't think about these books that you will never gain your own successes and that's the mystery now was that all that you have to pass the test you gotta be able to do whatever has to be required but true education involves being exposed to history and then to make it yours which is a mystery because we know less about ourselves probably than any other aspects of our lives but its most exciting of for one whose over 60 to learn more and more about yourself and that's what all of the wonderful authors put down in libraries so I want you to be aware of the fact that I think that jazz came from the human conscious and that consciousness is the basic commonality in the human experience that's why all cultures have their kinds of music they have their food they have their architecture they have their heroes they have their gods and whatever.

David: Can you tell me what does jazz mean to you?

Alvin: uh my the meaning of jazz has grown in my awareness uh from a child. I didn't have a name for jazz, and of course when I found out what jazz was uh in terms of history um it represented for me a way of expression that I have never experienced before so that's why I became a musician I heard a musician by the name of Charlie Parker he was a great alto saxaphonist and in when you play jazz you play from a point say like you talking from a point now but what I say I'm thinking about it on the moment well in jazz they call it improposation so the whole spirit of improposation the whole uh uh sight and joy if experiencing you saying

whatever you want to say at that particular time; so jazz means personal expression to me.

David: Ok, who or what inspired you to become a jazz musician?

Alvin: Uh, Charlie Parker inspired me to become a jazz musician

David: Can you tell a little bit about him?

Alvin: Yeh, he was from Kansas City, Missouri and he played alto saxophone; the blues is a intrical part of jazz uh I first heard him playing some blues (music playing) now when you hear a instrument playing a uh uh blues theme like that, then you can really get the sentiment of it so the blues like jazz is a media word in other words somebody observed activities in jazz in blues in rock and roll in funk and rap and may cause it by the perspectives that they had of it so that's why they call it the blues, but the blues can also be happy (music playing) an African rythm called the Bamboola (beats by the audience)-the African musical study is communal in other words you have music you have paintings you have dancer you have story telling you have all this together; every word used to describe uh uh African American music in America are media words somebody observed it when Charlie Parker and Dizzy Glasspie was playing they called their music beebop you may read in history where they call something cool jazz; so you have to label things define things or limit things in order to sell them; when you solve the mystery, when you your story then you will understand that there is a continuous to jazz that is not being affected by media words; rap had always existed in African American music; an epic is like what you are rapping about (rapping).

David: Ok, What is the most complicated task in being a jazz musician?

Alvin: Uh the comlic the most complicated uh task for me has been to uh come into an awareness that everything that I need to express is within me or that it comes through me from everywhere that we are connected and then have to face the limitations that I have on my instrument um like we were talking about blues and I played a little bit of the Charlie Parker just to give you an examplesay like if I play something like this (music playing) and in jazz you are dealing with spontaneous expression so whatever comes into your mind you have to be able to uh express it to be in your vocabulary so that's why it is important for young people to read books to learn the definition of words; so the most dificult thing is to get the technique uh expression like in my case as an instrumental and as a composer to express those things that come from within and through.

David: Ok, can you tell us the difference between jazz and other types of music like uh blues, gospel, rap, and sprirituals can you tell us the relationship between spirituals and jazz?

Alvin: Yes first let me tell you the similarities I mentioned Congo Square uh ok uh the music from south Louisiana the music in Cuba in oriented southern; and Brazil are the 3 main areas that African based music developed and stand out and started something else in Brazil they had the crumba and in Cuba they had the umbaca and in the United States we had what you would call Jazz, in the United States you would not only have Jazz, but you have Blues, the three main elements to the development of Blues in the United State of Blues is in Tennessee, Mississipp, and Texas. Back then New Orleans was an magnet, a big cosmopolitian area where



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people came for the same reason that they come now , so alot of people from everywhere went there. So New Orleans eventually evolved their own coloring of Blues. The Blues is not an American Phenomenon it's an African Phenomenon and it comes from the the sound of what is call the dreol, the dreol is an personality in African communities that in order to qualify to do that, they have to remember and be able to recite everything that happened in a culture in seven generations.

Alvin: You should spend some time remembering ,because we are so slow to respond as human beings to our negative experiences many times our inner experiences pass us by and those are the ones you will most remember because the other ones are not going to stick out. The Blues developed in a Savannah area ,thats why the Southern part of the United States has many descendants of African Americans in the same hypocrisy, it was very easy for that to happen. The Blues is related to Spirituals, Gospels, and Jazz because they have pure sounds just like the Blues. The earliest blues was played with the banjo, guitar, and human body ( He's playing the piece for them)

Alvin: That was the kind of Blues they would play in a Cabaret, in New Orleans. Jazz is an artform, but when you go to New Orleans you see people playing Jazz like this, ( he's snapping his fingers) Now in Congo Square, people do this ( he's clapping his hands and stomping his feet.) Jazz has become a global music. I've just returned from France, and the french like Jazz so much that they think it's their national music. You have all ethnic groups who play the music, and Jazz borrows from other cultural music experiences, after Congo Square one of the great Jazz musicians Buddy Bolden, the Jazz muscians in the Black community started playing those instruments that were brought to New Orleans by the European military band. That's why the brass band is sort of an instrumentation, in other words it's a group you would normally associate with France.

Alvin: In European music they have what you call an ablogado from the Italian period , and that they play things from an neurotic and rhythic background. Then you had a new voice and that was the voice of the African American. History will tell you that Jazz is a combination of African and European music, but that's not exactly true, but up until that point we have not done enough studying on Africans and African American culture, when I was in high school we had to fight for the right to learn about it. When you go listen to the great European tradition of classical music , well when you listen to Jazz played by Jazz muscians, you are listening to the Great African American tradition. It has not been fully been presented to the country of the United States because we are a basically a business oriented society and cicilization. We tend to trivialize things, like if you go into a department store you may hear good Jazz going on in the background, but it won't make any sense to you because it sounds just like can music.

Alvin: I'm challenging you to become more conscious, because if you can listen to someone play something, then you can be aware of your own perspective and then you will grow as a musician. That's the purpose of all music, including Jazz. The ancient Egyptians, who are they? ( He asks, but nobody can answer him) The ancient Egyptians life was a poliec life, that means that it was just like the United States also. Many of the great ones were black, but according to history, if you read

your history, they'll never say that. You had a longcoming knowledge, that's why you have to deal with the mystery because with the history, everybody is trying to deal with their own perspective and prejudices, now you can't let that stop you from reading books, in fact you should go into more books. You should always think as you go, you should never rely on face value. What I want to share about the ancient Egyptians is as late as the 18th dynasty dealing with Pharaoh. He was the first person to put forth monolithic concepts of God on a high. He was the father of what you would call the Egyptian mystery school. They taught in the mystery schools that a sound had color, a chemical and thought. So if that's true, cause we thought that music was reflective, we had music for dances, funerals, schools and on military occasions. It's pulled from the notion that music had to deal with something else. It's hard to believe that music has therapeutic purposes. In fact by the time Egyptian period had evolved into the Greek, the Greek started talking about therapeutic. You know our word therapy comes from that. By the time you got to Europe, you had what you call the alamo. Their promotional slogan was to turn the graceful notes of human nature into gold.

Alvin: If you talk to 10 other musicians besides me you will find that yeah we are musicians, but we are thinking about a whole lot of other stuff just like you. You may push it on the side and say I got to go to school, I got to get something to eat. When you hear Jazz, except it for what your perspective is, and don't follow the media presentations, because they will change the name to make them look good. Okay.

David: Um, okay could you tell me um what makes your style of Jazz interest others.

Alvin: Some people are interested in it, and some people are not. I've been at a concert at the University of Massachusetts and they did a tape, you know a video. I didn't know it, but they went around without me knowing talking to all the musicians in the band about me. One musician who I respected, his name is Rufus Reed, great Bass player, lives in New York and he said ugh " I like this music but I don't know what to call it". I played a piece for him that goes like this ( he is playing for the class) I'm talking about the evolution of bambula music. ( He's beating on the table), (He's playing the bambula piece again). That was the foundation of Jazz, by the time that the bambula operates what became a signature piece for the New Orleans piece which is the second line, and the second line is that rhythm when the bass drum say jaboom, jaboom, cha, cha, jaboom. In Cuba, they had what you call the abaque and that comes from an African religious symbol that they were starting to call Shango and in Brazil, the Thundring Blade and in Louisiana Boogie. The abaque is like this ( He's stomping his feet and clapping his hands with the class) ( He's clapping louder with the class, but this time he's not stomping his feet.) Know you can see that this one is a little more complex than the one in Louisiana. The English were administering colony, and the Ashanti and the English had a war going on in Africa, and the Ashanti were giving them some trouble because they were communicating with the drums, in other words they could let the other groups know what happened in this particular area. When I was in Africa, we studied sending messages on drums. For instance, the guy who taught me, clap your hands like this. ( Clap saying this un, deux, trois) In New Orleans they said hey now.

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Spirituals are like the use of African American and Afro-caribbean people of Christianity had a dark way of things being used. In Haiti, they would have some of the saints representative in catholicism.

So the spiritual is related in that manner in Blues, like in Jazz, so when you put the scriptural term with the music Blues, Jazz, then it's sacred, but when you take it away then it's affected it.

David: Can you give us the names of people we could contact for potential interviews or any type of music, including Jazz.

Alvin: Oscar Williams, the professor at Southern University, he teaches the history of Jazz. There's another gentleman by the name of Charles Lloyd who's a good

Date:

Interviewer: Avoi Fisher

Interviewee: Francis Williams

Subject: Negro Spiritual

Transcriber: Shervonda Smith

Avoi: State your full name.

Francis: Francis Williams.

Avoi: Your date and place of birth.

Francis: 4-29-46 Lions, Louisiana

Avoi: Your age?

Francis: 52

Avoi: Can you explain your educational background?

Francis: Do you mean, what schools I have gone to? I went to Scott Street elementary, Greenville elementary, Capitol junior middle school, at that time it was Capitol Senior, middle senior or junior senior, and then um the school moved over to Fuqua and I completed my high school there; and then I went to Southern University, uh, to complete my first degree and um my masters and then I attended schools all over the United States for those degrees and LSU and so forth.

Avoi: What is your occupation?

Francis: I'm a teacher at McKinley Senior High School

Avoi: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Francis: One of each

Avoi: Um, What do spirituals mean to you?

Francis: Initially, historically, they are apart of this fabric of America. There are five folk arts which are, uh, ~~indegenuous to America only, they started~~ here and developed here and the negro spirituals is one of them like quilting is one of the others. As a child, in church, I learned those spirituals, as a matter of fact those where ones that where sung ocapello. Somebody in the deacons pue would start one of those songs as a part of the devotion, and so I heard them coming up as a child then when I went to school I heard them because they

were part of the music program. Then I was invited to be in the choir when I was in junior high school and then their childrens choir at church started up and these where some of the songs that we would have to sing, so I grew up with those songs. the negro spiritual is apart of the rhythm in my heart its apart of my personal history because of what I remembered doing and then when became more aware of the negro spirituals in college because I was in the college choir and the professor there, professor Henry would tell us what the what the spiritual meant and spirituals have a uh flavor and a uh rhythm on there on, and then I joined Heritage in 76, whose purpose is to perpetuate and perserve the scene of the negrospiritual, and its original form which is ocapello, so its been apart of my personal history, all of my life.

Ayoi: Um where did spirituals, spirituals originate

Francis: They originated in the south on plantations, when people from Haiti and Africa were brought over to America in the slave trade. and as they were introduced to god in some form, and then when as they learned their language and begin to um see themselves, in this condition in this situation apart of the negro spiritual is an out cry to god a beseeking god to help them also theres hope that undergirth these songs cause they never left never left their home country in their hearts and their hope to return or their hope for better lifewhere the continuous strains throughout the music and then the music is also uh a relieve of what they learned in the bible you know like "Go down Moses way down in Egypt land " well they used that that uh scriptual text to send messages back and forth from one plantation to another because the plantation owner stop the drums cause the drums would talk and because this was a method of communication from the homeland they used it but when uh the slave owner begin to understand that this was a communication process then they started to sing and though songs had meaning like (singing) it means we are going north and you better come on because you your your enslaved or uh to go and so the negro spiritual has several meanings and part of it was also the juvenile celebration at times for weddings, or um sad times for funerals uh sometimes just to make the work less hard in the

fields and thing and it was all based upon the hope the bible uh and those, they became the jubilee songs.

Ayoi: Who or what inspired you to become a spritual singer?

Francis: As I indicated before it was a part of history., I grew up with it. I am a saprano, and and several of the teachers across my school years reconized the quality of my voice and they would ask me to sing or my mother would get a call saying we want Francis to be in the choir, and back in those days mom said mom meant and a part of that to was developing your talents and skills and being a part of a group that was doing something good and singing is always a wonderful thing and so thats how it started for me.

Ayoi: Can you tell me about your style of spritual music?

Francis: My style, I sing uh, whatever the style of the writer is I sing, I try to sing the dynamics of the writer I try to, not only understand what they were pertraying music, but I also try to make that music sing my own feelings about the Lord, about the theme of whatever the song is it's like one of my favorites, "Plenty Good Room" (singing) It fits my voice so often when people ask me to sing uh, a song especially one of my negro spirituals thats one of the ones I choose. My high school teacher Mrs. Joyce El. Rochelle had a song dedicated to her I want Jesus to walk with me., beauniful song, and uh, I do that on occassions because it has such a major import for me, she taught it to us over in high school and it can be done as a choir or as a individual, so sometimes I, my my style originates from the theme of the music what I think the writer intended and whatever personal feelings I attach to the content of the song.

Ayoi: Whats is the difference between your music and other types of music.

Francis: I think it was the quality of the voice that sings the music, I think it was interpretation of the music um, personal investment, and everybody does it so differendy, uh theres a story well that reminds me of how I think the music really is reflected in every voice ther was an alto concert, and people came forward to speak their, their reputation

and the theme was the twenty-third psalm a young man came forth and and spoke it elegantly received an ovation people asked for him to do it again and then an old man came and did the twenty-third psalm and nobody made a noise when the old man left the stage the young man came and ask a man standing next to him ,why did they do that, and the old man, the man replied, you knew the psalm, the old man knew the shepard. So it depends on where you are in yourself , and the knowledge of the music and what your trying to evoke if your just performing it then you give a performance and its just received that way, but if you are performing it and testifying at the same time it has a whole different um, sound then something comes forward in the music that develops and its going to touch somebody it all depends.

Ayoi: What is the most complicated task in being a spiritual singer?

Francis: Producing the tones uh, making the music uh, speak uh enunciating the words so that they come threw clearly, keeping the rythms, the rythms are intricate. they are varied they are the kinds of things when you are singing with someone else and their like SATB which is saprano, alto, tenor. and base, everybody has a different rythm everybody has a different entry time. and remeber spirituals one of the major uh description spirituals, some of them are call and response (singing)., that kind of thing, uh so you gotta come in with your part and uh sing it on time and sing it in rhthym, and that the quality of song, then of course is written by the author of the song or the lyrics.

Ayoi: What would you have done differently in becoming a spiritual singer, and why?

Francis: Nothing, I would do nothing differently, because I think that , in the bible it says a mans steps are ordered by God when you do that. when you do that with pleasing in his sight. when you yield yourself with opportunities that people present to you for doing certain kinds of things especially they reconized the talent in you, when you uh, listen to yourself . that self in you that says I can do that that this is a good thing and you uh move forward on it I think that those are the reasons why uh ask me the question once more cause something else is in my mind.

Ayoi: Um, what would you have done differently in becoming a spiritual singer.

Francis: Again it would be nothing, I uh Oh there is one thing I think that I would have followed the advice of a couple of people uh and going on to finish voice training. I was listening to a CD the other night with Kathleen Battle on it and uh several of the other female artists and they just bowed me over with the uh quality of their intonations um the the death of their voice you can hear the experience in their voice and you can hear training in their voice so how they deliver those songs has a magnificence that I don't think that I attain um, it has its like getting an uh uh an A and you go above and beyond the voice training takes your uh the eloquence of your music the rendition of your music the sound of your music above and beyond it puts it in the whole different realm and so this is the kind of thing that makes other people uh that inspires other people to praise the lord or to hear the beauty of the lord in that music so if I were to do anything differently it probably would be to uh continue voice training, but once it was gets to a certain point in your and in your age there's little that you can do to change the timber uh the quality of it because you began you know this is old vocal cords so there different, you take of them differently

Ayoi: um, is there anything else you would like to tell me about spirituals?

Francis: I am concerned that high school students don't know them. I am concerned that we though endeavor to preserve the music through our performance of it in the group I sing with Heritage there, there not done in high school uh, I think that apart of the historical loss is when schools desegregated some of the uh, music was shoved to the side so the students don't know it, and they don't have a connection with it when it is done so they think it is a old folks song, they don't understand the history of it, they don't know the importance of it in terms of uh the the sharing with one another they don't realize the fellowship that is evoked through that music and so I am sadden because I think that there is a lost um and part of it is our fault because even though we singing it in our in our um concerts its not taught and if its taught, it has a whole different sound I've heard some negro spirituals done lately in some high school choir and I'm thinking no that's not the way it sounds its



been uh I know if its I don't know if its I want to use the word anglesized or western I don't  
I can't decide what the descriptor is for the sound that I hear, but it is not the sound that I  
grew up with. So, so thats a concern of my that ,that, people graduate from high school  
especially having had music and have no idea what the music is like so they don't they don't  
theres a part of their history that they don't know.

Ayoi: um, can we contact you for a follow up interview?

Francis: um,hum, not a problem at all (laughing)

Ayoi: Thank you for doing this interview.

## **Appendix E**

### **A Book We Wrote: African American Music Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow**

# AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC



RAP



GOSPEL



R&B



BLUES



REGGAE



JAZZ

YESTERDAY,

TODAY,



& TOMORROW...

# **AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC: YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW**

**BY  
McKINLEY HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENT HISTORIANS:**

**Erick Banks  
Ayoï Fisher  
Heidi McGee  
Erin Porche'  
David Simpson  
Shervonda Smith  
Brandon Stewart  
Kimberly Turner  
Travis White  
Samantha Woodruff**

## INTRODUCTION

This year our African American History class participated in an oral history project. Oral history is when you interview someone and find out about their past experience.

Coming up with an idea for our topic was initially very hard. We finally came to the conclusion that the topic would be African American music. We didn't want to focus on just one style of African American music. So, we broke it down into several categories: Traditional West African, Spirituals, Blues, Jazz, and Rap. Through our research, we learned that all African American music had some affiliation with slavery. In doing this project, we learned that our heritage is very rich and important. We also learned that most of our Black musicians are overlooked and are not recognized for their musical talents. Many different people were interviewed, but due to limited time, we were not able to include everyone in our book. We deeply appreciated their participation.

The first style of music that we researched came from West Africa. We learned that West Africans used drums to send out meanings. Later, Negro spirituals were used like drums to send out messages. When Negroes were enslaved, they sung certain songs to let other slaves know where to go and when there was trouble. Blues later became another expression of Negro life. The next type of music we researched was Jazz. Jazz originated in the United States. Jazz is appreciated as one of the most important musical art forms for its contribution to African American culture. The last type of music we focused on was Rap. Rap is a form of popular music that is generally spoken or chanted at a fast pace rather than sung. Rap music first developed in the mid 1970's in New York, and later spread to other urban areas.

In our class, we not only learned the history of African American music, but we also learned its significance in African American culture.

**Interview with Kwaku Agyeman'yeboah**  
by  
**Brandon Stewart and Heidi McGee**

My name is Kwaku Agyeman'yeboah. I have been an African musician all my life. At birth, the people of my culture meet you with music. I have been listening to music since I was born. I've been taking part in the music of my culture as a musician every since I was seven years old. Our music is handed down from generation to generation. Music has been a part of my culture for a very long time. I am an Ashanti. As an Ashanti, we have various types of music for various occasions and ceremonies. The music we play depends on what is going on.

African music is part of my culture and my heritage. I try and let it stay the way it is even though some people try to change it a little bit. Because African music is a part of my culture, it means a lot to me. My uncle inspired me to become an African musician.

Learning the various beats of African music, for various occasions and trying to differentiate the music is the hardest task. Playing the wrong beat for the wrong occasion can cause confusion. It is kind of funny, but it is real serious. We have different kinds of music for marriage, for death, for birth, and all kinds of stuff. It would not be appropriate to play music for death at a birth ceremony. I have to know which is which. The music for death is really slow. It is a more solemn beat. The birth of a baby is a happy occasion. Everybody rejoices. We have naming ceremonies for the new born babies. Because this is a happy kind of thing, the music is more upbeat.

If I could have done something differently in becoming an African musician, I would have started playing at an earlier age. Although I was seven when I started playing traditional African music, in my culture, we can start playing the drums at the age of three. It is easier to pick up, or learn to play, if you start at an earlier age. Although, we can start playing the drums at three, we're not really a master right then.

Everybody has their own style. I try to incorporate other kinds of music into my music to see how it will sound. But my style as well as traditional African music is

influenced by a lot of factors. Traditional African music, though it has been handed down from generations to generations, is influenced by where you live and where you have been. People use bigger instruments, depending on what they have available to them. A lot of musical instruments that I have played, if I went home—back in Ghana—I would play, but I don't have them here so I have to improvise ... right. In that case, I may not have the right kind of sound. Therefore, I'm influencing the outcome of the music. I am actually changing the music cause this isn't the real thing and I'm trying to do the real thing. But what I have is not the real thing, so I'm content with what I have. So depending on what you do or where you are or what you have with you influences the music.

Most often, I would say typical Africans, people born in the country and have lived on the continent, have a different way of playing the same kind of music that people in the United States play. People here, well African Americans, are use to hip hop and all that kind of stuff. What they are playing is a kind of Jimbay. They play the Jimbay at a fast pace but with a different low kind of beat. Other differences that exist between traditional African music and the music we hear today are the instruments used to make the music. Traditional African musicians use farga instruments. These are all hand made instruments. The drums are carved out of a tree. The shakeres are all calabacious. The gargo is made of hot metal found in the ground. It is all indigenous and it is still being used today. Wherever you go, if they are playing traditional African music, you will find the same kinds of instruments being used. In modern music you have all kinds of stuff. They now use synthesizers. But in traditional African music the instruments that are being used are the same instruments that were used long ago. Even though they may have to modify the music just a bit it is still the traditional stuff.

With African music there is no specific way of doing it. There is no specific format to it. You do not write it like Beethoven or Bach would write their music. It is out of intuition and out of skill that this music is produced.

As different beats are made on the drum, we are able to mix messages with our music. We tell stories through our music. Stories are created with music to have meaning. Somewhere in my country-- someone is playing music. When someone is trying to tell a story or trying to carry a message across to somebody, they play music. He is not going to go to him and say, hey I have something I want to tell you. He goes to his house, and the type of music he plays on his drums sends a message to him. Music is a means of communicating in our culture. During ceremonies, the music lets everybody know when and what event is going on. If a baby has been born, the sounds of the drums and the beat of the music lets you know what the situation is...what is prevailing. The music carries the message.



## **SPIRITUALS**

Spirituals are types of religious songs made by famous Southern African Americans. A spiritual is an emotional song and has a very strong rhythm. Spirituals are especially moving when sung by a group. A leader sometimes sings one or two lines alone, and a chorus comes in with the refrain. Spiritual singers often emphasize rhythm by clapping their hands.

Enslaved African Americans love for songs led them to put their feelings into their singing at worship and at work. The slaves based most of their spirituals upon characters and stories from the Bible. The manner which these stories told Black spirituals show their colorful imagination and simple faith. Many slaves thought of themselves as modern children of Israel and sought freedom from bondage. These songs were appealing and sincere. Well-known spirituals include "Go Down, Moses", "Deep River", and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", little was known about spirituals outside of Southern State until Blacks were freed from slavery. In 1867, William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware published a collection of black music called "Slave Songs of the United States". In 1871, spirituals were introduced to other parts of the United States by a group of Blacks called the Fisk Jubilee singers. This group of students from Fisk University traveled throughout the United States, England, and Germany giving concerts to raise money for their school. Other Blacks followed their example. The black quartets from Hampton Institute and Tuskegee Institute also became famous for singing spirituals.

Spirituals are now one of the best-known forms of American music. Major writers of spirituals include Black composers like Harry Thacker Burleigh, William Dawson, and Hall Johnson. Such Black singers as Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and William Warfield also helped to make spirituals popular.

**Interview with Ms. Francis Williams  
by  
Ayo Fisher and Shervonda Smith**

My name is Frances Williams . I was born in Lyons Louisiana on April 29, 1946. I have one brother and one sister. I am 52 years old. Growing up, I attended Scott Street Elementary, Greenville Elementary, Capitol Junior-Senior High , and Capitol Senior High. When Capitol Junior Senior moved to the present location on Fuqua Dr., it then changed to Capitol Senior High. After graduating from Capitol, I attended Southern University where I received my bachelor's and master's degrees. I have also completed course work at Louisiana State University and other colleges and universities around the country.

To me spirituals make up the very fabric of America. There are five folk arts which are indigenous to the United States. The Negro spiritual is one of them and quilting is another. As a child in church , I learned those spirituals. As a matter of fact, spirituals were sung acappella. Somebody in the deacon's pew would start the morning devotion with a Negro Spiritual. So, I heard spirituals coming up as a little child . When I went to school I heard them ,because they were a part of the music program. I was invited to be in the choir when I was in junior high school. When the children's choir at church started up, spirituals were some of the songs we had to sing.

Negro spirituals are apart of my personal history because of what I remembered doing growing up as a child. When I became more aware of Negro spirituals, I was attending college. Professor Henry, the director of our college choir, heightened my interest. He would tell us what the spirituals meant. He said spirituals had a flavor and a rhythm of their own. Later, I joined Heritage in 1976. The purpose of Heritage is to sing Negro spirituals while perpetuating and preserving Negro spirituals in their original form, which is acappella .

Spirituals originated on the southern plantations. When people from Haiti and Africa

were brought to America in the slave trade, they were introduced to a Christian God. As the enslaved Negroes adapted to their new surroundings and developed their language, they began to see themselves in horrible conditions. As a consequence of their enslavement, Negro spirituals were developed as an outcry to God. Their hope to return to their homeland for a better life was the continuous strain throughout the music. What they learned in the Bible, like go down Moses way down in Egypt land, was used to communicate secretly with other slaves. They used spiritual text to send messages back and forth from one plantation to another, because the plantation owners stopped them from using drums. Drumming was a method of communication from their homeland. When the slave owner began to understand that this was a communication process, they prohibited drumming and the enslaved Negroes started to sing. The Negro spiritual has several purposes. Spirituals were sung for weddings and for funerals. Sometimes slaves would sing spirituals just to make the work less hard in the fields.

I grew up with spirituals. I am a soprano. Several of my teachers throughout my school years, recognized the quality of my voice and would ask me to sing. Many times my mother would get a call saying "we want Frances to be in the choir." Back in those days what mom said is what mom meant. Participating with various choirs meant that I was able to develop my talents and skills and be apart of a group that was doing something good. Singing is always a wonderful thing and that's how it started for me. My style of singing depends on the writer. I try to sing the dynamics of the writer. I try to not only understand what they were portraying in the music, but I try to make the music sing my own feelings about the Lord and the theme of the song. One of my favorites is "Plenty Good Room". This song fits my voice, and I am often asked to sing it. My high school teacher, Mrs. Joyce L. Rochelle had a song dedicated to her called "I want Jesus to walk with me." It is a beautiful song and I sing on occasions. She taught us this song when we were in high school and it has major importance to me. It can be sung as a choir or as an solo.

Sometimes my style originates from the theme of the music. What I think the writer is intending or the personal feelings I attach to the content of the song. In each song there's a story that reminds me of how I think the music should be reflected in every voice.

For example, there was an oratorical contest, and people came forward to speak their recitations. The theme was the Twenty Third Psalm. A young man came forth and spoke eloquently. He received an ovation. People were asking him to do it again. Next an old man came. The old man did the Twenty Third Psalm too, but nobody made a sound. As the old man left the stage, the boy asked the man standing next to him why didn't anyone respond. The man replied, the young man knew the psalm, the old man knew the "shepherd". So it really depends on where you are in yourself and the knowledge of the music and what you're trying to evoke. If you are just performing, then you give a performance and it will be received that way, but if you are performing and testifying at the same time your song will have a whole different sound. Something will come forward in the music as it develops and it's going to touch somebody.

However, producing tones, making music, speaking the words enthusiastically so that the words come through clearly and keeping up with the rhythm of the music are all very complicated tasks. When you are singing with somebody else, for example, in a STAB song which is soprano, tenor, alto or bass, everybody has a different rhythm and a different entry time. Some spirituals are call and response. You have to come in with your part, sing it on time, and sing with rhythm and, of course, sing the author's lyrics. When you yield yourself with opportunities that people present to you for doing certain kinds of things, they recognize the talent in you. It is up to you to move forward.

If I could start all over I think that I would have followed the advice of a couple of people, and finished voice training. As I was listening to Kathleen Battle the other night, I could hear the experience in her voice as well as the others that were singing with her. How they deliver those songs has a magnificence, that I don't think I attained. It's like getting an A. You go above and beyond with voice training and it takes you to the

eloquence in your music and puts your music in a whole different realm. In the Bible it says a man's steps are ordered by God when you do what is pleasing in his sight. This is the kind of the thing that makes other people want to praise the Lord. So, if I were to do anything differently, it would probably be to continue voice training. Once one gets to a certain point in their age there's little that he or she can do to change the tone and the quality of their voice, because they know that their vocal cords are getting old. I feel that you should start when you are younger, like while in high school. I am concerned with the fact that some high school teenagers graduate from high school without knowing spirituals. I think a part of the historical loss occurred when school desegregated. Some of the music was shoved to the side, so the students don't know it. They don't have a connection with it. When it is sung, they think it is an old folks song. They don't understand the history of it. They don't know the importance of it in terms of the sharing with one another. They don't realize the fellowship that is evoked through the music. I am saddened because even though we sing in our concerts, the purpose of the spirituals are not taught.

Today Negro Spirituals have a whole different sound. Lately, I've heard some Negro spirituals performed in high school choirs, and I'm thinking, no that is not the way it sounds. I don't know if I want to use the words anglicized or western. I can't decide what the descriptor is for the sound that I hear. But, it's not the sound that I grew up with. So, that's a concern of mine; that people graduate from high school especially having had music, and have no idea what the music is like. They don't know that this is a part of their history, they don't know.

## **Blues**

Blues are a kind of music that developed in America from various musical expressions of Black America. The blues are an extremely flexible type of music and musicians with various styles perform it. The blues contributed greatly to the development of jazz. Such jazz musicians as Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and Jack Teagarden have often include variations of the blues in their music. In addition, some classical music and numerous rock, folk, and country music compositions also show influence of the blues. The basic blues design is a 12 bar form that is divided into three sections of four bars each. Most blues lyrics consist of a several three-line stanza that repeats the first, and a third line expression which responds to the first two. Many blues lyrics reflect loneliness or sorrow, but other lyrics declare a humorous or defiant reaction to life's troubles. The blues became more widely known in the early 1900's. A band leader named W.C. Handy began to publish blues songs that won wide popularity. Handy's composition included Memphis Blues (1912) and St. Louis Blues (1914). In the 1920's, Bessie Smith emerged as one of the most talented and popular of the classic blues singers. Recordings by Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, and others helped bring urban blues to a larger audience.

**Interview with Tabby Thomas**  
**by**  
**Kim Turner, Ayo Fisher, and Brandon Stewart**

My mother used to have a Victrola when I was a little boy . We did not have much but she had all the old blues records . I was just 9 or 10 when I was exposed to this early blues music , there was just something about it . I loved it ! I would hang out in the drugstore and listen to the records on the jukebox . We did not have any radio stations playing the blues here in Baton Rouge . There was WJBO, they played a variety of music, but no race records . You would have to listen to a jukebox in order to hear the blues . I have always loved music . It has always been inside of me .

When I was attending school at McKinley High, Roy Brown and his Mighty Mighty House Rockers performed one night at the school . The moment I heard him singing and saw the band ... it just did something to me . Their show really inspired me . I found my voice in singing gospel . My grandfather founded a Baptist church, in which I sung in the junior choir . It was not until I completed service in the U.S. Air Force in 1950 that music affected my life again . I went to Ellis bowling alley on Ellis Street one night . I met up with a guy who had a band. He was a singer also . He informed me of a talent show the next night at the Ellis Theater . He insisted that I audition, so I did . I saw the disc jockey from KSAN radio. His name was Fatso Barry . They were sponsoring the talent show . I had never been on a stage in my life . There was a small band onstage and this guy asked me: "What are you here for"? I told him I am here to sing a little blues, but I don't know anything about what key the song has. I plan to sing a tune called Long About Midnight . He took me to the piano player and all I had to say was Hey, Long about midnight, when he says hey man you are in . He told me I was eighth in the line up the next night . The guy before me did his number and the house went wild then I sang my song and the house went crazy . I won 15 dollars that night . This talent show was my first professional gig .

My reputation as a blues singer quickly grew, and I was given a chance to record for J and M Records. He would record songs during his lunch hour from his shoe-shining job. One of the songs that I recorded that made the radio was "Baby snap the whip and I will Make the Trip" I went through some things back then, I know what it is like out there. Everyone helped my songwriting. We had lots of materials here. With my rising popularity, I realized I would have to learn an instrument to further my career and nurture my emerging songwriting style. I was able to formally put my words to music. Later, I had a chance to go to California. California was a good experience, but my desire for family and a steady income led me back to the place of my birth, Baton Rouge. I was doing everything I could do. I was hustling man. You know like my song "Never Get Rich In Bed". You got to keep working and working. I worked at filling stations, driving trucks, washing dishes ... but I was always keeping the music going on the side. I hustled and managed to do it all. While doing all of this, I wrote and recorded "The Hoodoo Party" in 1962. It was a hit for Excello Records. I went on to record for several labels, laying down such favorites as: "Midnight Is Calling", "Thinking Blues", and "Church Members Ball".

Around 1970, I formed the Blue Beat label, releasing several well received albums, formulating a signature sound of both Baton Rouge and other Louisiana musical identities. Later, I opened the Blues Box. The most important thing I ever learned is you can't win all the time.

My spirit, and all the spirits of all the great blues artists who have performed there just fill that place up. When people go to the Blues Box, they get a good feeling that you can't get anywhere else, music you can't hear just anywhere. The hours of performing and running a nightclub keeps me hustling.



## Jazz

Jazz is considered by many as the only musical form to originate in the United States. The history of jazz began in the late 1800's. The music grew from a combination of influences, including Black American music, African rhythms, American band traditions and instruments, and European harmonies and forms. Much of the best jazz is still written and performed in the United States. Musicians from many other countries are making contributions to the jazz society. Jazz was actually widely appreciated as an important art form in Europe before it gained recognition in the United States. One of the key elements of jazz is improvisation (the ability to create new music spontaneously). This skill is the distinguishing characteristic of the genuine jazz musician. Improvisation raises the role of the soloist from a performer or producer of others' ideas, to a composer as well. Improvisation adds excitement to jazz at each performance. Another important element of jazz is syncopation. To syncopate jazz, jazz musicians take patterns that are even and regular and break them up, making them uneven, and put accents in unexpected places. The earliest jazz was performed by Black Americans who had little or no training in Western music. These musicians drew on a strong musical culture from Black life. As jazz grew in popularity, its sounds were influenced by musicians with formal training and classical backgrounds. During its history, jazz has observed influences from folk and classical music of Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world. The development of instruments with new and different characteristics have also influenced the sound of jazz.

Jazz may be performed by a single musician or by a small group of musicians called a combo. It may also be performed by a big band of ten or more pieces. A combo is divided into two sections: a solo front line of melody instruments and a back line of accompanying instruments, called a rhythm section. The typical front line consists of one to five brass and reed instruments. The rhythm section usually consists of pianos, bass drums, drums, and sometimes an acoustic or electric guitar. The line instruments perform

most of the solos. These instruments may also play together as ensembles. A big band consists of reed, brass, and rhythm sections.

The rhythm section in a combo or big band maintains a steady beat and decorates the rhythm with syncopated patterns. It also provides the formal structure to support solo improvisations. The drums keep the beat steady and adds interesting rhythm patterns and syncopation. The piano, or sometimes the guitar plays the chorus or harmonies of the composition in a rhythmic manner. The bass outlines the harmony by sounding the roots or bottom pitches of the chorus on the strong beat of each measure. Any true instruments, especially the piano, may also solo during a performance.

## Interview with Alvin Batiste

by

David Simpson, Heidi McGee, Shervonda Smith, and Erin Porche'

My name is Alvin Batiste. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. I am sixty-six years old. My mother and father's maiden names are Frankie Rodney and Edgar Batiste. I have one sister. I was educated in New Orleans, LA. at F.P. Richard Elementary School and Booker T. Washington High School. I attended Southern University and Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, LA. Today, I am a professional clarinetist and a jazz instructor at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Historically, jazz is said to have begun in New Orleans. But, I think that jazz emerged out of the musical consciousness of African Americans. Consciousness is simply awareness. When you say African Americans, you're talking about Americans whose ethnic legacy goes back to Africa. You people represent the most mature generation or the most Americanized generation, in that respect. Having lived for over sixty years, I'm always impressed with the fact that if you put somebody behind a screen and heard students talking they would be talking about the same subject and many times using the same slang. When I was a kid it wasn't like that. Your ethnicity made you stand out.

As I stated earlier, jazz arose out of the human conscious, but according to historians jazz started in New Orleans. Historians get the best information that is available at that particular time. But, libraries are where you can uncover the history and reveal the mystery. Now, let me here you say mystery, again slower my-st-ery, again slower my-st-ery, again slower my-st-ery. Yes, my story. If you don't engage in books and if you don't think about these book, then you will never gain your own consciousness—my story. True education involves being exposed to history and then being able to make it yours which is the process of unvailing the mystery.

I became a musician after hearing a blues musician by the name of Charlie Parker. He was a great alto saxophonist from Kansas City, Missouri. The blues is an intrical part of jazz. There are three areas known for the development of blues in the United States—

Tennessee, Mississippi, and Texas. Back then, New Orleans was a magnet, a big cosmopolitan area where people came for the same reasons that they come now. Eventually, New Orleans evolved their own coloring of blues, which came to be called jazz.

The Blues is not an American Phenomenon. It is an African Phenomenon. It comes from the sound of what is called the griot. The griot is a personality in African communities. In order to qualify to be a griot, the person has to remember and be able to recite everything that happened in a culture within seven generations.

Blues are related to spirituals, gospels, and jazz. But blues—like jazz, gospel, and spiritual—is a media word. Every word used to describe African American music in America is a media word. For example, somebody observed Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie while they were playing and decided to call their music bebop. You have to label things, define things, and limit things in order to sell them. When you solve the mystery, only then you will understand that there is a continuum to jazz and it can not be affected by media words.

History will also tell you that jazz is a combination of African and European music, but that's not exactly true. Up until this point, we had not done enough studying on Africans and African American culture. When I was in high school we had to fight for the right to learn about African American culture. When you listen to classical music, you are listening to the great European tradition. When you listen to jazz, played by jazz musicians, you are listening to the Great African American tradition. Jazz has not been fully presented to United States in this way. Because we are basically a business oriented society and civilization, we tend to trivialize things. If you go into a department store you may hear good jazz going on in the background, but it won't make any sense to you because it sounds just like any kind of music.

The most complicated task for me as a jazz musician has been to come into the awareness that everything I need to express is within me. Everything comes through me

from everywhere. Once I come to grips with this then I am connected to my music. In jazz you deal with spontaneous expression. This means that whatever comes into your mind you have to be able to express it through your music. The expressions and the feelings must be apart of your vocabulary. This is why it is important for young people to read books to learn the definition of words. This is probably the most difficult thing about being a jazz artist, because you have to get the technique or expression to express those things that come from within and through you.

The ancient Egyptians originated what is know today as the Egyptian mystery school. They taught in the mystery schools that a sound had color, a chemical and thought. Ancient Egyptian life was just like life in the United States. They were the first people to put forth a monolistic concepts of God on a high. Many of the great ones were black. But in history, if you read your history, they'll never say that. That is why you have to deal with the mystery. Because with history, everybody is trying to deal with their own perspectives and prejudices. Like ancient Egyptians, other Africans and Africans Americans also thought that music was reflective. We had music for dances, funerals, schools and on military occasions. This idea is pulled from the notion that music has theraputic purposes. In fact, by the time the Egyptian period had evolved into the Greek, the Greek started talking about theraputic. By the time music got to Europe, their promotonal slogan was to turn the graceful notes of human nature into gold.

Having said all of this, today students, I am challenging you to become more conscious. Because, when you are conscious, you can listen to someone playing and be aware of your own perspective. That is the purpose of all music... including jazz.

**Interview with Mr. Frank Williams**  
by  
**Erin Porche' and Kim Turner**

My name is Frank Edward Williams. I was born September 21, 1961 in Memphis, Tennessee. After graduating from high school, I recieved a bachelors Degree in Music Education at Southern University. I am currently the Band Director at McKinley Senior High School and the Minister of Music at Community Bible Baptist Church. My mothers' maiden name is Dorothy Castle and my father's name is Frank Edward Williams Sr. I have - one sister.

Jazz is one of the only art forms that is true to the American heritage. Jazz originated in America. Many of its' influences come from all types of areas. Jazz has European influences, as well as African influences dealing with its' rhythms. Jazz, in my perspective, is an expression of the inner feelings that one has and it allows the musician to become a composer. Jazz deals with improvisation, which means to be able to make up things off of the top of your head that makes sense and relate them together. Jazz is an outlet for the soul, you really play what you feel and not what someone else has written down on paper.

My high school band director inspired me to be a jazz musician. He introduced me to a program entitled, " Jazz Anyone ". This program was conducted by a guy named Willie Thomas from Florida. Willie Thomas is a jazz musician. After one program and watching several video tapes of Wynton Marcellis, I became interested in jazz and wanted to explore it little further. I have relatives who traveled and performed overseas in Europe and Paris. One of these relatives, Jimmy Smith, got me interested in listening to jazz stations. I began to listen to the jazz stations and became more and more involved in what jazz was. I enrolled in a jazz program in high school and that is where my interest in jazz was fine tuned.

The style of jazz that I play is traditional. This jazz idiom is soulful and it contains not only the scales and characteristics, but involves blues and gospel. This soulful jazz

stems from the soul, the feel for music that Africans brought with them. The Africans had a different interpretation of music and they mixed some of the European style with the African style. This made it become more soulful and ethnic. This is the type of jazz I like to play; traditional jazz with a lot of soul.

The most complicated task in being a jazz musician is being able to relate to the audience. I try to paint a story for them through my music. The message has to get across without sounding like I am just playing a cluster of notes or a whole bunch of scales. The average person does not really know what jazz is about or what it is suppose to sound like. Whenever I play a jazz solo, or if I have the band playing in format at the school, I try to choose songs that people, who do not have any idea about what jazz is can relate to. I use songs that allow the audience to paint a mental picture about the music. You know, if the song has a lot of Latin rhythms, then the audience can envision vacationing on an island or beach.

Jazz is very creative, and doesn't always keep the same form. Blues usually has a definite form and a meaningful sound. Blues is more about expressions and people, for example people who are having hard times. Jazz, however, causes feelings of a lot of different emotions like—sadness and happiness. You know the feelings that one has and wants to release. Blues, in some aspects, use more techniques and requires more technical thinking about what your doing. You have to be able to play in the key of the song and the musician can pretty much get by. In jazz, just knowing the key is not being able to play. You have to be on top of those changes and keep up with the changes to make it sound like jazz.

Gospel music, although it contains a lot of jazz, really deals with the spirit and the worship of our creator, Jesus Christ and God. The music, although it sometimes sounds like Jazz or Blues, can cause different emotions.

The main difference between gospel music and jazz music is that gospel is used specifically to edify Christ and the body of Christ and God. Jazz is used for personal

enjoyment. Gospel music a lot of times involves choir. Jazz has choir capabilities most of the time. You think of jazz as a combo type of thing with instruments. There are not many jazz vocalists left out there. Whereas with gospel music you do not find as many instrumentalists as vocalist.

I have been playing jazz for about sixteen years. When I began playing, I only played what I heard, and what I could imitate. Now, when I play jazz, I imitate what I hear and feel, however I know the theory it involves. I can interpret the music a lot better. I also have a better understanding of what jazz is. I am able to play the piano, the drums, and the bass guitar. There is a lot more cohesiveness and my music does not sound immature. When I first began playing jazz, people could tell that I was a beginner. Because I could not make the changes I talked about earlier, I would play the same key over and over. Now I know better and I have learned to adapt to what ever changes may come in music. My playing sounds more mature and more professional.

This style of music influences popular African American music today. Take a few singing groups now like: Take Six, Aliyah, Janet Jackson, and other new artist, all of their music contains idioms of jazz. The voices that most song writers and composers used back in the days were basic and simple. The way it sounded was simplistic and anyone could imitate it. The voices they use now are much more complex and they have jazz voicing in all of the music.

You have rap that even manipulate jazz. Rappers use samples of jazz music. There use to be a group named Das EFX. Das EFX did a lot of jazz integration with rap. I also remember a group called The Diggable Planets, which was a rap group. They use to implement jazz through out their music. So, jazz has really affected the sounds of contemporary music and African American music of today.

Like most musical art forms, I believe that it is important to relate jazz to a story. If you leave the audience out of what you are doing, then they have no way of communicating or understanding what you're doing. That really makes your playing



useless. That's just like getting an exercise book and inviting a group of people to listen to me practice. So you know, if you're not painting a picture that people can get into, feel enjoyment, and really touch their spirit, then the whole purpose of playing has been defeated—because both parties leave not feeling any better. There has been no benefit and there has been no upliftment to the listener. The music has not charmed their soul.

There was a guy named Orpheus, from Greek mythology. He charmed the trees and all of the things in the forest by playing his harp. This is the same kind of thing that musicians do today. They try to get the audience to really lose themselves and to take the listeners mind off a problem that they are having at home or something that's going on with their life. The music can become soothing to their spirit.

By playing jazz, it has been easier for me to pick music up by ear and recognize chords. Jazz helps me to write music and helps me to do arrangements for the marching band. It has also helped me to do a lot of different things musically. People will hire a jazz musician much quicker because a jazz musician can adapt to any situation. So, I have played blues, Latin music, and country western. I didn't really enjoy playing country western but I played it because I could play it. I have also played gospel music. In the gospel music of today, if you can't play jazz you're really lost as far as the new contemporary sounding arrangements go. So, I thank God the Creator of jazz for giving me the chance to play this type of music and to be able to use jazz in gospel music. Jazz has been a big help.

Jazz is truly one of western civilizations only form of music that we can really call our own. A lot of musicians have contributed heavily to jazz such as Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. Duke Ellington was an early big band composer. He contributed heavily to jazz music. John Coltrane was more of a contemporary traditional composer. Miles Davis was a contemporary traditional composer and trumpet player. He also made big contributions. This list can go on and on. They have other people who have made contributions like Horace Silver and Dizzy Gillespie. Horace Silver dealt with Latin

music and Latin jazz. Dizzy Gillespie dealt with Afro-Cuban jazz. All of these people and different idioms help to paint and to preserve an art form that remains to be true to America. This turns out to be one of our greatest contributions to music all over the world. People in Europe and other lands like to fly American musicians over to Europe and other faraway places to play jazz. They feel that European musicians are playing imitation jazz. So, they like to get the authentic American musicians over to play jazz.

## RAP

Rap is a form of popular music that is generally spoken or chanted at a fast pace rather than sung. Rap is performed over musical accompaniment that emphasizes rhythm rather than melody. Often these accompaniment consist of short segments of earlier recorded music combined in new patterns.

Rap music first developed in the mid 1970's in New York City, and soon in other urban areas, primarily among African American teenagers. The style soon spread throughout the United States and much of the world. Some critics believe that rap replaced rock music as the creative force in music of the 1980's and 1990's. But, the lyrics of some rap songs have caused controversy. Critics have charged that rap lyrics promotes racism and violence and show contempt for women. The largest inspiration for rap came from disco jockeys in Jamaica. They would talk, or toast, over recorded music they played in clubs.

The style, known as dub, produced popular records that talked over instrumental backing and electronic effects. A Jamaican born disco jockey known as DJ Kool Herc is often credited with introducing rap to New York City. He and other jockeys used records playing on two turn tables, switching rapidly from one to the other to mix and match beats between two songs. Popular rappers have included M.C. Hammer, Dr. Dre, Ice T, Run DMC, and the Beastie Boys. The first rap hit was "Rappers Delight" (1979) by the Sugar Hill Gang. "The Breaks" (1980) by Kurtis Blow helped to spread rap's popularity among a wider audience. Much earlier rap was primarily concerned with a dance and party spirit. However, "The Message" (1982) by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five took a harder look at social issues and their portrayal of black inner-city-life. Artists such as Public Enemy and Ice Cube have popularized styles of rap that are even more revolutionary.

**Interview with Shane Bennett  
by  
David Simpson and Erick Banks**

My name is Shane Bennett. I am 21 years old. I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1977. I have three brothers and one sister. My mother's name is Mrs. Ossie Bennett. I started rapping between 1988 and 1989. When I started rappin, it was just a hobby. For me rappin was something a brother just did for fun, or to get a little change in his pocket. So, he could go and buy some candy. But, later on rapping became something greater to me. Because the longer you stick with something, the more it becomes apart of you.

To me rapping is an expression. It is a way to express a hidden side of a person. You can sit and listen to somebody and get a feel from them when you hear them rap. Their lyrics will take you to a whole 'nother level. Through the lyrics you can see the other side of the rapper. That's the side that no one knows about, but everyone can relate to. It is the side that shows the down sides of life. You know, the side that shows the troubles that life can take you through.

Some people ask me why I choose this form of music, I tell them that I didn't want to be a singer. Rapping was just the thing to do back when you had a lot of old-school rappers doing their thing like, Flavor- flaid and Kool- Mo- D. These brothers really made a brother like me want to rap. So I guess all the glitter of the big chains and stuff really put it on my mind. I started saying to myself, that could be me.

The hardest part of being a rapper is putting up with a lot of bull, things you don't even have control of. Sometimes you have to let things roll like they roll. My style of rap differs from others, because if you listen to what I'm saying, it's around you... it's Baton Rouge. That's the difference in my rap.

We have two national artist, Master P. and Snoop Dogg, living in Baton Rouge. You rarely here them say anything about Highland Road. You have to travel

down Highland Road if you're from Baton Rouge or the "South". I just feel certain areas, certain spots, and certain things should be brought to the table to let people know that this is Baton Rouge not New Orleans or California . This is the atmosphere down here.

Most people say that music affects the listener. I believe it does. Because when a person listens to Pokundishions, he will think that's me. He will think this relates to me because that's something I've done, or something I'm going through. This rap isn't a lot of I'm jumping out of the car with my gat , rat a tat tat. It's more like I'm knocking on heavens door, asking God does he have room for one more, because I'm not too sure if I'm going to make it. My rap lets a brother know there's another way. There is another way. Everybody can't be a thug, you will have to be a man someday.

If I could change anything in my rap, it would be the sounds. You know right now we are trying to get some fresh sounds like real horns— Tubas and Xylophones. We don't want that computerized stuff, because it gives a different sound. I feel that if we had the real horns, we could provide a better array of music for people .

I feel that everybody at one point of time holds a position or a point in life. It's all about being patient. Some people have to depend on others in order to make it. That's how it is with rap. I'm really looking for support from everybody, basically from people from my city, Baton Rouge. I'm not telling anybody to go out and buy my CD like crazy and we get rich, because that's not going to happen. When you buy the CD another organization come up in your own city. I know everybody would love to see another album with people from your hood in it, and another organization straight from Baton Rouge can now be known.

**Interview with Cornell Moore**  
**by**  
**David Simpson and Erick Banks**

My name is Cornell Moore. I am 21 years old. I am a current resident of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I have two brothers and three sisters. My relationship with my brothers and sisters are normal. It's a -- I look out for you-- you look out for me type of thing. I have a mother and a father. They are Dolores and Paul Moore. I am not a rapper but a producer. I have been with Double O for some years now and it's real. What influenced me to start producing is the sound of music. I like to create my own music. I am able to express myself through music.

My career as a producer started as a little kid on the block. As a kid I use to rap for change. I chose this form of music because it gives a message. When you hear something like "Master P" the beat will catch you before the words will. I thought to myself, if he could do it, I can do it too. I try to make my music so that it catches your ears and creates a vision.

The most complicated task in being a producer is everything. I have to keep up with all the tapes and the computer disks. But, the most important thing is making up the music. I have to listen to the words and think of a sound that will create a background for the message that the rapper is making.

I create my beats from scratch, every cut on our CD is original. Like a "popeyes" butter milk biscuit every cut on the CD is from scratch. There is no sound on there that you have heard on someone else's tape. I guarantee you that if you listen to our CD you'll replay something. Everyone looks for ...a CD that they can play over and over again...and that's "real". Because I do mine from the mind, my style of music differs from others. I get a flow in my head and I run with it. I would like to change the sound of my music. The computer stuff is straight but it is not full. It's not "original". I want horns and things of that sort which can bring out the beauty of my music.

I would like to state that Pokundishions stands for providing an opportunity for the

## **Conclusion**

Through our oral history project, we learned that music is more than just sounds and melodies. It is a form of expression. It symbolizes one's thoughts about certain situations. Through music an artist tells a story. He or she is able to sing or perform into life their background and their culture. Many great artists in our book had a unique way of expressing themselves through their music. Through our interviewees, we learned the right way to do things and gained an understanding for the importance of life itself! We also learned that within different forms of music, there are different messages. Different rhythms and grooves put together for certain occasions. For example, depending on the rhythmic intent and expressions of the artist, jazz can cause a person to feel happy, sad, grief, boredom, and many other feelings that come with life itself. This is what makes music. The elegance of life. Finally, through our project we acquired a deeper understanding of how music influences as well as affects African American culture.

## **Appendix F**

### **Roots of My Family Tree: Participants' Biographical Forms**



Mc Kinley High School

African American Studies

Oral History Project

**Project Participant  
Biographical Information and Family History**

**To the Interviewer:** The purpose of this form is to collect information for a brief description of the lives of interviewees to be included with each tape recording and transcript and in a comprehensive resource guide that we hope to develop. You should try to complete each section as fully as possible with the interviewee, but please do not press the interviewee to answer any question which seems too personal.

**Current Information**

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Last Middle First

Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City State Zip

Home Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Work Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate here precisely how the interviewee would like his/her name to appear in written materials:

(FIRST NAME)

(MIDDLE/NICK NAME)

(LAST NAME)

**Family History**

**Interviewee:**

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
city county state

Current Marital Status:  
Single[ ] Married [ ] Divorced[ ] Widowed [ ]

Spouse's name: \_\_\_\_\_  
first middle last

Spouse's Date of Birth (death): \_\_\_\_\_ (\_\_\_\_\_)

Spouse's Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
city county state

Spouse's Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

**Parents of Interviewee:**

Mother's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
First Middle Last

Mother's Maiden Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mother's Date of Birth(death): \_\_\_\_\_ (\_\_\_\_\_)

Mother's Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
city county state

Mother's Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Father's Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
First Middle Last

Father's Date of Birth (death): \_\_\_\_\_ (\_\_\_\_\_)

Father's Place of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_  
city county state

Father's Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

*Highest Level of Education attained* \_\_\_\_\_

**Sisters and Brothers:**

Full name	Birth (death) Date	Place of Birth
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Please indicate the interviewee's rank order of birth in the family (1st born, 2nd born, 3rd born) [\_\_\_\_\_]

**Children:**

Full Name	Birth (death) Date	Place of Birth
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Grandchildren? \_\_\_\_\_ Number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Interviewee's Residential History**

Please list below the places where the interviewee has lived and the dates (approximate):

Place (city, county, state)

Dates (from-to)

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**Interviewee's Education History**

Name of School

Place  
(city, state)

Dates

Year/Degree  
Completed

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**Interviewee's Work History**

List the interviewee's current and most important previous jobs:

Job

Employer

Place (city, state) Dates

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Has the interviewee ever received any awards or honors, or held any offices? Please describe, including dates and places:

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**Interviewee's Religious History**

Current Religious Denomination: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Church Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Past church memberships (name, place): \_\_\_\_\_

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## **Appendix G**

### **Out of the Mouth of Babes: Students' / Historians' Interview Questions**

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### **Interview Questions for Mc Kinley High Students**

1. Would you please state your full name.
2. Please state your date of birth?
3. Please state your age?
4. Please state your parents name?
5. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
6. How old are they
7. What school did you attend for elementary, junior-high, and high school?
8. What is the highest educational attainment of your parents?
9. What is your mother's occupation?
10. What is your father's occupation?
11. How would you describe yourself?
12. If your best friend could chose 3 words to describe you, what would they be?
13. Who is someone you look up to as a mentor
14. Why?
15. How would you describe your family?
16. Who are you closest to in your family and why?
17. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
18. If you could change one thing about your family, what would it be?
19. Where do you see yourself 20 years from now?
20. How do you like to spend your free time?
21. What role does religion play in your life?
22. How would you describe yourself as a student?
23. How would you describe McKinley?

text books and hand outs, etc. Why or Why not?

48. How would you define oral history?

49. What did you like most about reading the Mis-Education of the Negro?

50. What did you like least about reading the Mis-Education of the Negro?

51. Do you think this book relates in any way to the lives of African Americans today?

52. If so how?

53. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience in our class?



## **Vita**

**A native of Nashville, Tennessee, LaVada Taylor Brandon completed her studies at Fisk University, in 1991, with a dual bachelor of arts degree in political science and public administration. In the fall of the same year, as a seventh grade social studies teacher in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana, Taylor Brandon embarked on a career in and on behalf of urban education. Her experience in this urbanized context incited her desire to discover ways of providing more educational opportunities for urban African American learners and other historically marginalized youth. Consequently, Taylor Brandon returned to Nashville in 1993, and in the spring of 1994, began studying education administration and supervision of instruction at Tennessee State University receiving the degree of Master of Education in August 1995. However, still feeling inadequately prepared to address the educative needs of urban learners, she matriculated to Louisiana State University in the fall of 1996 and began pursuing doctoral studies in curriculum theory. Taylor Brandon continued her interest as well as scholarship in and on behalf of urban education and historically marginalized learners becoming a doctor of philosophy in curriculum theory. Her current research foci are urban education, critical race theory, post colonial discourse, secondary social studies methods, and oral history. Beginning in the fall 2001**

**semester, Taylor Brandon will be an assistant professor of education at  
Purdue University Calumet, in Hammond, Indiana.**

## DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

**Candidate:** LaVada Taylor Brandon

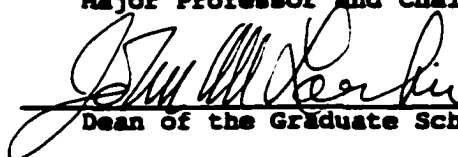
**Major Field:** Curriculum and Instruction

**Title of Dissertation:** Navigating Knowing/Complicating Truth: African American Learners Experiencing Oral History as Real Education

**Approved:**




Major Professor and Chairman

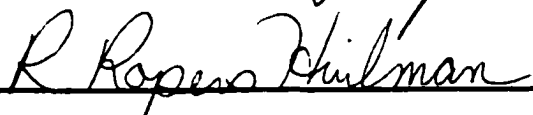


Dean of the Graduate School

### EXAMINING COMMITTEE:









**Date of Examination:**

June 29, 2001